CHAPTER 1

“T his must be distinctly understood or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am about to relate. Marley
was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that,” Data said, his best attempt at a period accent
coming out more like a Cockney squawk than actual speaking, as he strode downstage from his mark near the stage
right wings to center stage. “Old Marley was dead as a doornail. The registrar of his burial was signed by the
clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it. And Scrooge’s name was as good
upon ‘Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to.”

With mention of Scrooge’s name, Reginald Barclay began working his way across the sidewalk stage left of
Data’s mark, leaning on the silver-tipped rosewood walking stick that had seemed perfect for Scrooge. He hobbled
like a feeble old man. Come on, Reg, Beverly thought. You can do it. Feeble, yet regal. Remember that.

“Scrooge knew he was dead? Of course he did. How could it be otherwise? Scrooge and he were partners for I
do not know how many years. Scrooge was his sole executor, his sole administrator, his sole assign, his sole
residuary legatee, his sole friend, and sole mourner. And even Scrooge was not so dreadfully cut up by the sad
event, but that he was an excellent man of business on the very day of the funeral, and solemnized it with an
undoubted bargain.”

The whole time Data was going about with his narration, Beverly’s eyes had been glued to Reginald Barclay.
He stood there in the holodeck’s re-creation of an old English street, cane in his right hand, practicing walking like
someone two hundred years his senior. He certainly was getting the body language down, but there was something
about his manner that still wasn’t there. “No, Reg. That’s not quite it, either,” Beverly Crusher said, pondering both
the set and her actors with equal levels of perplexity.

The Victorian era in England was something that the holodeck usually got, but this time there was just
something that didn’t feel right about it. That was the problem with using the holodeck as a set designer; it took the
director’s words literally, offering little if any creativity of its own. So, while the crisp white gingerbread decorating
the houses was beautiful, it just felt so…repetitious. The design was just fine, but it lacked the distinctiveness of one
that Lieutenant Royce might have put into the production back on the EnterpriseD.

That was when it hit her. The scene didn’t feel alive. The trees, fences, and houses felt like nothing more than
cheap set decoration. There was none of the lived-in look that Royce used to give his sets. Royce may have been one
of the least productive scientists in xenobiology, always aiming that eagle-sharp focus of his on one species,
concentrating on them for weeks on end—his papers on the Cardassians alone could probably fill a library—but he’d
always chipped in when necessary, and his creativity was something she was really beginning to miss. Ensign
Taylor’s costumes had always been quite the works of art on their own, as well.

Well, it is the first production on the ship. Royce and Taylor both moved on. I’m sure a new group of designers
will come together soon enough. In the meantime, Beverly would have to serve as set, costume, lighting, and sound
designer in addition to her usual duties as director and stage manager. Yes, I definitely need to find a design team
before I try another production. This is what I get for having bright ideas about starting the theater troupe up again.

“Doctor,” Data said, interrupting her thoughts, “perhaps if I began the opening narration as I walked onstage,
instead of coming on and then speaking the words? Would you like to see that?”

If there was one thing that could be said about Data’s growth over the years she’d known him, Beverly would
have immediately said creativity. He had wanted the role of Scrooge, but she had said no. He had already played the
role before, even if it was before he installed the emotion chip, and thanks to that chip, he was rediscovering that
same creativity with the verve of a child cut loose with every toy in a make-believe toy box.

Beverly was spared having to find an answer for the android by the voice of Will Riker on the ship’s comm.
“All senior staff report to the observation lounge immediately.”

“All right, then,” she said. “We’ll pick it up from here tomorrow. Computer, save program and exit.”

The yellow-on-black grid that lined the holodeck’s room bid them farewell as Beverly, Data, and Reg all
headed out. The latter made his way toward an aft turbolift while Data and Crusher went fore.

“Perhaps if I tried the introduction as a walkthrough,” Data suggested, timing his offering just as the turbolift
doors opened to allow them access.

Beverly instructed the lift where to take them, and then considered Data’s suggestion. “I don’t know. What
we’re lacking here is life, Data. There’s an inherent humanity to the story that I’m not sure we’re finding. Maybe
when we can get Reg’s confidence back up and have him actively participating, he’ll be able to give you a voice to
play off of.”

“I must ask why you chose to cast Lieutenant Barclay in the Scrooge role, Doctor. He has suffered from bouts
of stage fright before. Would it not be more prudent to cast an established actor in the role?”

“I know, Data. But he can’t get over that stage fright if he doesn’t face it. Counselor Troi and I believe it would
be the best thing for him right now.”

The turbolift came to a halt, depositing them down the hall from their destination. “But, Doctor,” Data said as
they walked, “is it not Lieutenant Barclay’s main objective right now to install the new Emergency Medical
Hologram?”

Beverly tried not to groan. She had argued for months with Louis Zimmerman to keep from having to do a
secondary “field test” of the EMH on the Enterprise. While she might have granted him the initial funding for the
project all those years ago, his initial plan had also included a test-run on the U.S.S. Voyager. Of course, with
Voyager missing, there was no way for Zimmerman to keep an eye on his creation, so somehow-she had a feeling
someone in Starfleet Command had a grudge against her-she ended up with Lieutenant Barclay installing the thing
in her sickbay.

The disruption to sickbay while he’d installed the holoemitters alone had been enough to make Beverly want to
just go back to her quarters and not come out until he was done. Even Alyssa Ogawa, normally one of the more
patient people Beverly knew, had been driven to distraction by Reg’s inherent “Barclay-ness.” Beverly had been
sorely tempted to try a vocal chord relaxer she’d heard about years before, just to see if it actually worked on
humans.

“Yes, Data, but he’s also part of our crew. Just like the crew works as a team, all of the people involved in
theater work as a team. You remember that, don’t you?”

Data appeared lost in thought for a moment. He’s probably going back over every byte of memory he has for
that.

Just in time to save her from his response, they reached the observation lounge. When they entered, Beverly
noticed that everyone was present except for her and her android companion. “I’m sorry; we were down rehearsing
when you called, Will.”

“That’s all right, Beverly,” Jean-Luc said from his seat at the head of the table. “Now that you’re both here, we
can get started.”

Beverly and Data quickly took their allotted seats at the table, Padraig Daniels, Geordi La Forge, Deanna Troi,
and Will Riker in their usual positions around Jean-Luc. No sooner had she landed in her chair than Picard began
with, “We’ve finally received our first diplomatic mission.”

“IT’s about time,” Riker said.

“Yes, Number One, it is. We’ve set a course for Starbase 375. There, we are to pick up one emissary from the
planet Kendaray in the Gamma Quadrant. Their government has managed to obtain information that may be crucial
to the fight against the Dominion. Deep Space 9 cannot spare the Defiant to commit to this mission, but they believe
our well-honed diplomatic abilities may be just the thing. We are to retrieve the Kendarayan ambassador from
Starbase 375 and take him to a summit meeting on Denobula Triaxa.”

Deanna Troi leaned forward in her chair, her dark brow delicately furrowing. “I have read some reports about
the Kendarayans, sir. They are a rather interesting species.”

“Yes,” Picard replied. “I’ve read those same reports. Beverly, this might interest you. They’re humanoid, very
much like us, but still not quite like anything we’ve encountered before. Their skin secretes an abundant, iridescent
version of sebum. From Dr. Bashir’s reports during their first contact encounter on Deep Space 9, it is a natural
collection of lipids that both keeps their skin moist, and acts as an external barrier for infectious germs and bacteria.”

Beverly’s eyebrows rose. “This may be the first time I’ve seen oily skin be a good thing,” she said, backing her
attempt at humor with a half-smile.

“Yes,” Jean-Luc replied. “However, let’s just say that the Kendarayans had something of an awkward first
contact with an exploratory team in the Gamma Quadrant. We found out the hard way that they take great offense at
the notion of someone wearing gloves to greet them. They consider it a grave insult. It took six months just to get
them to agree to this meeting.”

Beverly thought that over for a moment. Gloves were one of her standard medkit supplies. If she couldn’t use
those…”Have we got proof that this oily skin of theirs isn’t toxic to other species?”

“No,” Picard flatly replied. “Dr. Bashir was unable to get a sample to study, and the Kendarayan envoy became
very wary of anyone trying to touch him during his visit as a result.”

Beverly had a feeling something else was coming. “But you, being the brilliant diplomat that you are, managed
to negotiate permission for me to get a sample for study?” she asked, raising a red eyebrow.
Picard shook his head. “Not quite. If we wanted this meeting, we had to agree to their ‘no gloves’ clause. However, I did manage to talk them into allowing you to examine the envoy when he arrives on board, in order to enrich the Starfleet knowledge of the Kendarayan people for our new alliance in the fight against the Dominion.”

“That way,” Riker began, the matter-of-fact tone of his voice suggesting he knew exactly what Picard’s negotiating tactic had been, “if one of their ships runs into trouble, Starfleet can render appropriate assistance. Improve the depth of any potential alliance.”

“Precisely,” Picard said, giving his first officer a sly smile.

Beverly couldn’t resist a smile of her own. “And just in case the envoy should become ill on the journey to Denobula Triaxa, it would help me treat any problems. How much do we know about their food tolerance?”

“Enough to know that a basic Vulcan diet should be sufficient for their needs. From what the reports said, the envoy was particularly fond of plomeek soup.”

“How much do we know about their culture?” Deanna asked. “Do they have any other customs we should know about in advance?”

Picard appeared to think for a moment. “None that they’ve made us aware of. Counselor, we may be relying on you for help in sensing when we step too close to a boundary with this envoy. I want you to let me know as soon as you meet him if you’re able to pick up anything.”

“Of course, Captain.”

“Mr. La Forge, how are the preparations for the envoy’s quarters coming?”

The chief engineer smiled, a broad gleaming white against his dark skin. Beverly was happy to see that that smile now extended to his eyes. The optical implants had been performing quite well in the months since the procedure, if Beverly did say so herself.

“Ahead of schedule, sir,” Geordi said. “The microfiber textiles that they requested were far easier to replicate than we initially thought. I’ve got a team programming the circadian cycle lighting to account for their planet’s day/night cycles now, and the sonic shower is being reprogrammed to not slough off the lipid layer of their skin. We’ll be ready.”

“Good,” Picard said. “Everyone, this is our first diplomatic mission on the ship, and while I know the Federation is still having some issues over the elections back home, let’s try to keep those from surfacing on board, shall we?”

Daniels smiled. “Shouldn’t be a problem, sir. I’m starting to think everyone on board voted for Min Zife.”

One gray eyebrow rose toward the security chief. “Well, who people voted for is nobody’s business but their own. Although, I do agree, it’s been a bit more peaceful here than on a few of the other ships in the fleet. All right, then. We’ll arrive at Starbase 375 in twelve hours. Let’s make sure our guest is as welcome as we can possibly make him. Dismissed.”
T welve hours later, Beverly was standing in Transporter Room 1 with the rest of the senior staff, everyone decked out to the nines in their best dress uniforms. Beverly liked the blue of medical. It wasn’t nearly as harsh a color against her skin as, say, the red of command. Although, for some reason she couldn’t quite put her finger on, she had never thought the color bad for either Jean-Luc or Will Riker. It suited both men just fine. Command red had just too much…responsibility along with it. She’d seen what it had done to Jean-Luc over the years, and Deanna had told her time and again how much the burden would get to Will. I guess in Will’s case, the old saying “behind every great man is a greater woman” really is true, even if those two haven’t actually reignited their relationship.

She didn’t dare think the same of Jean-Luc Picard. Their time had come, and gone. Still, a small portion of Beverly’s memory held those emotions she’d felt from him in a soft box, padded and tucked away in a nice, easily reachable corner. It was there for her whenever she felt the need to comfort herself with the knowledge that there was still one person in the world besides her son-whatever plane of existence he was off on at that moment—that gave a damn about her and her future. Of course, she knew he’d probably never act on it, not while they were still in the same chain of command, so there was no sense getting her hopes up, but it was still comforting to know.

“Transporting the envoy on board now, sir,” Chief Mun Ying said.

“Everyone, best face forward,” Picard said, lowering his hands to his sides. “Here we go.”

The transporter began its work, and slowly a being coalesced into existence within the field. A humanoid of medium build, but with shoulders hunched in a manner that either spoke of age, or the weight of high office. Beverly was puzzled at first, as the creature looked perfectly human, and the transporter should have shut off ages ago…

She blushed when she realized that the transporter effect had worn off, and the shimmer she was seeing was from the man’s skin. Stop staring, Beverly. It’s rude. Still, she couldn’t stop herself from doing a visual once-over of her potential patient. He was dressed in stately iridescent robes, looking almost as though he’d stepped right out of ancient Rome, save for the fact that the robes held a hood to cover the envoy’s face. He almost seemed as though he were hiding. In a way, she suspected, he was. What kind of a man would willingly leave his homeworld and walk into enemy territory during wartime? What information could he have that would be worth such a risk? What did he think he could accomplish?

Memories of Alidar Jarok surfaced in Beverly’s mind. Jarok, an admiral in the Romulan military, had abandoned everything he had ever held dear, just to try to change the world for his daughter. The only thing he had found at the end of his mission was death by his own hand. Did this man, this iridescent, sparkling, bizarre man, have such aspirations for the Kendarayans?

“Envoy Sellassars,” Jean-Luc said, taking a step toward the man. “Welcome aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise. This is my senior staff.” Gesturing toward his right, he began an attempt to introduce the staff individually.

Picard got through Daniels and La Forge before Sellassars surprised everyone by walking over to Deanna Troi. “You,” he said, in a voice that sounded like the twinkle of fingers plucking the high notes on a harp. “You are…telepath?”

Deanna blushed, “No, sir. I do have empathic abilities, though.”

He reached out, brushing a hand against Deanna’s cheek. “Can you tell me what I’m feeling, empath?”

To her credit, Deanna didn’t back away. “Fear,” she said. “But also curiosity.”

“You have nothing to be afraid of, Envoy,” Picard said diplomatically. “You are among friends here.”

“Am I?”

That simple question piqued Beverly’s curiosity. “What gives you cause for fear, Envoy?” she asked. “You come in friendship, as do we.”

Sellassars’s attention turned to her, and she immediately understood why Deanna had reddened. Within that iridescent, glittering human face rested the deepest, darkest eyes she had ever seen. “You are a friend?”

“Yes,” Beverly said.

“But you wish to take from my flesh, to catalogue me with the other species in the Federation’s collection, no?”

Beverly’s eyes widened. “Oh, no, Envoy. It isn’t like that at all. It’s really-”

“Envoy,” Jean-Luc said, saving her behind once again. “This is my chief medical officer, Beverly Crusher. If you should require any medical attention while on board the Enterprise, she is the one who will tend to you.”

“Yes, Envoy,” Beverly said, trying not to sound too relieved that Jean-Luc had stepped in to clear up yet
another of her verbal messes. “I merely want to ensure that I’m able to attend to any medical need that might develop on our trip.”

“You say that as though you expect something to happen,” Sellassars said. Beverly could have sworn from the tone in his glittery voice that if he’d had eyebrows, they’d have been raised. How do you explain Murphy’s Law to an alien? “Kendarayans have no need for medicine, Captain. I believe Julian Bashir knew that well enough to pass the information to you.”

Jean-Luc tilted his head slightly to the left. “Yes, Envoy, but the two of you hardly had the time for a proper conversation, if I read the doctor’s report correctly. I would love it if we could rectify that on our way to the summit. I am willing to keep a member of the senior staff here at your disposal at all times. If you wish to be left in peace, they will allow it. If you wish to talk about your people, then I hope you’ll contact me, but we will ensure that someone is available for you at all times, Envoy.”

Sellassars’s eyes went back to Deanna. “At all times, Captain?”

“Within the boundary of our customs, yes, Envoy.”

“Then I will allow you your sample of flesh, Dr. Crusher. Only if I am also allowed to speak with the empath after.”

Deanna gave the man a prim bow. “Of course, Envoy. I would be honored.”

Will, however, didn’t seem quite so sanguine about the idea. “If I may,” he began, “I’d love to sit in on your discussions. There may be some aspects of Federation culture that I can explain.”

Troi glanced sideways at Riker. “Don’t worry, Will. I sense no harmful intent from him.” Turning back to Sellassars, she said, “We have prepared quarters for you, exactly as your diplomatic communiqué requested. I would be happy to escort you there, Envoy.”

The Kendarayan’s skin, for a brief moment, looked as though a light were passing over it. “Yes,” he said, “I am quite tired. That would be…how do you say…appreciated.”

“I’ll tag along, if that’s all right,” Riker said.

“Of course, Will,” Troi said, a smile Beverly recognized as being from her you and I will talk later collection appearing on her features. “Shall we go?”

Riker moved toward the transporter room door first, followed closely by Troi and Sellassars, who had draped an arm through Deanna’s as though they were old friends. “Tell me about your world,” Beverly could hear him say as the doors closed behind him.

“Keep an eye on them, Mr. Daniels,” Picard said. “It may be nothing, but the last thing I need right now is Deanna’s mother going on at length about something happening to her daughter.”

Daniels smiled the smile of those who’d never actually met Lwaxana Troi, though he, like everyone on board, had heard about Deanna’s recent trip to Betazed and the birth of Lwaxana’s son. “Yes, sir,” he said. “I’ve already got a guard stationed outside Envoy Sellassars’s quarters, and a site-to-site transport on permanent standby for the area.”

Beverly couldn’t help but notice the wariness that had crept into Jean-Luc’s voice. “Good work. I feel like a father who’s watching his daughter go on her first date.”

Beverly put a hand on his shoulder. “Jean-Luc, Deanna’s a capable person. She’ll be fine.”

“And if anything goes wrong,” La Forge threw in, finding his voice for the first time since they’d arrived in the transporter room, “I’m sure Commander Riker will be far more of a problem to him than Lieutenant Daniels’s team ever could manage.”
CHAPTER 3

Beverly leaned back in the chaise in her quarters, getting a few more pages of her book in before she turned in for the night. It was a novel that Jean-Luc had loaned to her, one that was a biography of the founder of the first Mars Colony, Shazzerd. Jean-Luc had said that it had been in his family for generations, ever since his relatives were among the first to settle in the colony. Beverly was beginning to consider turning the story into her next production, but she wasn’t sure Requiem for a Martian wasn’t exactly a marquis title. Perhaps One Man’s Dream instead?

“Dr. Crusher to sickbay immediately. Medical emergency.”

Beverly quickly threw on her robe, running out of her quarters toward the turbolift. It wasn’t until she was halfway to sickbay that she realized she had forgotten her combadge. Damn it. “Computer, open a channel to sickbay, please.”

“Dr. Crusher, is that you?”

It was Alyssa Ogawa, and she had never sounded so nervous in all of the years she’d known the woman. She’d even seen Alyssa through her engagement and wedding to Andrew Powell. Alyssa had been one of the calmest brides she’d ever seen. “Alyssa, I’m coming, what’s wrong?”

“It’s Counselor Troi. She… I can’t explain it.”

“I’ll be there in a few seconds,” she said. That was when something tingled in the back of her mind. “Is Will there?”

“I brought her in, Beverly,” Riker said. “She contacted me after she said she was having trouble falling asleep and wanted to talk. When I got to her quarters, she was unconscious and completely nonresponsive. Nothing would wake her up. I think she’s in a coma.”

The turbolift doors opened, and Beverly sprinted the distance to sickbay. If Deanna really had fallen into a coma, what brought it on? Of course, Sellassars was the obvious choice, but he didn’t seem at all interested in anything beyond her empathy. When Beverly finally reached sickbay, she entered to Deanna’s unconscious form on the central surgical biobed. Deanna had at least managed to change from her uniform into a nightgown before whatever happened had happened. Alyssa worked over her like a bumblebee, and Riker stood just out of arm’s reach-hovering, but not really hovering.

“Let’s see what we’ve got,” Crusher said, grabbing a tricorder as she strode toward her patient. “No sign of trauma or a brain hemorrhage. Will, she was like this when you found her?”

“Yes,” Riker said. “She told me she didn’t feel quite well, and asked if I could come over and keep an eye on her. When I got there, she was on the floor, out cold.”

Beverly spared a glance up at him between scans. “And she didn’t respond to you at all?”

“Not even when I tried picking her up to put her in bed.”

When she glanced back down at the scans, they were frustratingly perfect—for someone in a coma. “Damn it. Everything indicates she’s in a coma, but I can’t find the cause. Her neural functions are so low.” She quickly pried both of Deanna’s eyes open, checking the pupils. “Nonresponsive. What’s going on here?”


Alyssa lifted a hand to her lips, “Oh, my God.”

Beverly lowered the tricorder to Deanna’s arm. She was trying to ignore the discomfort that the sight of the Betazoid’s skin turning gray was causing, but her success rate was rather low. Deanna’s fingernails were normal, as were her lips. Beverly closed the surgical clamshell over Deanna, hoping its more in-depth sensors might be able to see what she was missing. “But her lips are fine. Her blood oxygen is within normal range; everything compares with her last physical perfectly. What’s causing this?”

“What about our new friend?” Riker asked. “He seemed to have quite an interest in her. Could he somehow be involved in this?”

Beverly shook her head. “Nothing in the records showed any sign of an agent that could cause something like this.”

“What if it’s something they didn’t get a chance to look for?”

“We need to make sure she’s stable first. Alyssa, Will, get out of the area. I’m going to put her in a stasis field while I run an in-depth scan. That way nothing biological will advance, and nothing artificial should function.”
“Surely you don’t think she’s been infested with nanites?” Alyssa asked.

“Never rule anything out, no matter how insane it sounds,” Beverly said. “Come on, Will, you need some sleep.
This is going to take a while. Alyssa, you, too. I want you both to go back to your quarters and get a full eight
hours.”

Riker didn’t budge from his position against the nearby wall.

“Will, do I have to make it an order?”

“That only relates to the captain of the ship, and you know it.”

“Fine,” she said, “I can call Jean-Luc and have him order you to your quarters.”

In what Beverly could only call a pout, Riker trudged toward the nearest biobed and lay down. “Happy now?”

Beverly recovered a hypospray from one of the drawers near the bed. Checking that it was filled with ambizine
as she thought, she gave Riker a good dose in the neck. As his eyes fluttered shut, she pulled the blanket up over
him. “Now, I’m happy.”

Alyssa, however, still had her medical tricorder trained on Deanna Troi.

“Alyssa,” Beverly began, “there’s nothing that you can find with a tricorder that the surgical scanners won’t see
just as easily. You get to go to bed, too. You have a baby that needs you. Deanna isn’t going to benefit from a nurse
who’s exhausted, and neither will I. Scoot. Now.”

Alyssa closed the tricorder, placing it on the tray beside the surgical bed, and walked away. “I’ll be back first
thing in the morning,” she said.

“Of course you will,” Beverly replied as the doors closed behind the nurse.

With Riker asleep, and Deanna under constant scan, it was time to hook up the stasis component of the biobed.
She pressed on one of the operating room panels, and it opened to allow her access to the storage room behind it.
Yes, there was the headpiece and the footpiece. Both would hook into the surgical support, and then she’d be set. It
took her a few minutes to wrestle both of the rather heavy pieces into place, but when she finally did, and was sure
the seals were locked, she said, “Computer, put the patient in low-level stasis and send all current scans to my
office.”

“Stasis field in place, and all scans are in your office.”

That was when it occurred to her that she’d forgotten one vital thing. Deanna would need monitoring for the
evening. Groaning, she realized that the only real solution to the problem was to see if Louis Zimmerman’s great
experiment worked. “Computer,” she said, trying not to sound too defeated, “activate Emergency Medical
Hologram.”

A balding man, one who bore a depressing resemblance to Dr. Zimmerman, materialized in her sickbay.

“Please state the nature of the medical emergency.”

A part of Beverly briefly wondered why she hadn’t activated the thing when she was putting the stasis pod
together. Then she realized that not only had Zimmerman programmed the thing to look like him, it apparently
shared some of his presumptive arrogance as well. It walked toward Deanna, grabbing a medical tricorder along the
way. “The patient is comatose?”

Beverly took a deep breath. “Yes. We have one patient, half-Betazoid, half-human. She’s comatose, and her
skin appears to be losing oxygenation, but there’s no sign of cyanosis anywhere. I’ve put her into a low-level stasis
field to keep whatever this is from advancing much further, but I need you to monitor her while I look at the results.
Can you do that?”

If the EMH had been wearing glasses, she could have sworn he would have been looking at her over them.

“That’s all?”

“Yes,” she said, “that’s all. Now can you do that?”

“The ship’s computer could do that. What do you need someone with my skills for?”

With a very long sigh, Beverly said, “It’s very late. I need you in case I fall asleep and something happens. The
patient needs constant monitoring. Preferably by someone with as much medical knowledge as you have. And you
don’t require sleep.”

The hologram’s huffiness seemed to abate at the ego-preening. Zimmerman really did make this thing in his
own image. “Well, perhaps I can be of some use. If you require a diagnostician of my exquisite programming, I’ll be
here…minding the baby.” Not even someone on another level of the ship could have missed that sarcasm. Sarcasm
as part of its bedside manner. Oh, yes, Zimmerman and I are definitely going to have a chat over this.

Beverly slowly and deliberately walked into her office, composing the message to Zimmerman in her head as
she walked. A doctor couldn’t have that dreadful a bedside manner for long.

Grabbing a raktajino from the replicator, Beverly sat down with all of Deanna’s scans and began trying to think
of something, anything that might explain the Betazoid’s condition.
CHAPTER 4

When Beverly awoke, she could have sworn she heard that infernal Louis Zimmerman’s voice. “Zimmerman,” she blearily said, not having enough energy to even lift her head, “you’ve got your funding, get out.”

A pause followed. “What funding?” Zimmerman said, his voice questioning her sanity.

That got Beverly’s attention. She slowly cracked one eye open, and discovered that she wasn’t in her bed. From what little detail she could make out, it looked like her office. Padds and printouts littered her view, and an empty mug sat just at the corner of her vision.

That was when she remembered. Sitting bolt upright, she said, “Deanna.”

“Yes,” the EMH said, “that is what I was coming to tell you. She’s awake. I have no information on how she awoke while in stasis, but she has awakened.”

Beverly couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “What?” she asked as she pushed past the EMH into the examination room.

“Computer, download the records that the Emergency Medical Hologram recorded last night and feed them into my office. Then close down the stasis field.” Riker was still out like the proverbial light on the biobed. That sedative worked better than I thought. Pointing at the EMH, she said, “You. Come over here and help me get the stasis attachments off.”

“I do have a name,” the EMH said, indignant.

“You do?” Beverly asked. She certainly hadn’t been informed of anything of the sort.

“Yes,” it said, valiantly trying to pull its dignity back together. “I do.”

“Care to share it with me?”

The EMH seemed to think for a moment, then appeared shocked. “I don’t have a name.”

Just like Zimmerman. Make it in his own image, but don’t give it a name. “Well, we’ll figure one out for you later.”

Beverly lifted the footpiece of the stasis chamber off without much trouble. Leaning it against the operating theater’s wall, she walked to the front of the biobed. The EMH hadn’t bothered to move. “Well, are you going to help, or not?”

The hologram huffed, then walked over and helped her move the piece, placing it on the floor beside the footpiece.

Beverly immediately added Occasionally Helpful Jerk to the short list of names for the EMH before turning her attention to her patient.

Deanna lay under the surgical clamshell, her nightgown none the worse for wear, and looking quite puzzled by her surroundings. “Why am I in sickbay?” Her eyes darted around the room, until she found Will Riker, still sleeping. “Will? Is he all right?”

“He’s fine, Deanna. Just needed a little help sleeping. What do you remember about last night?”

Troi looked lost for a moment, then it seemed to come back to her. “Envoy Sellassars wanted to know more about Betazed and the Federation. We walked through the arboretum, and he told me he was interested in how we deal with the natural realm. He was especially intrigued by the intermingling of nature with medicine in the Federation. He seemed most interested in the olive trees. I told him that humans had been using the olive and its oil for medicine for centuries, and that seemed to particularly fascinate him. He also asked about the Bajoran takeo herb and its use to fight swelling.”

Beverly managed not to say what was on the tip of her tongue. What she did say, however, was, “How many times did he touch your skin, Deanna?”

“Beverly, I don’t think—”

“I’m not talking about that, Deanna. I need to get a sample of that protective sebum of his. If it’s causing this, we need to start on an antidote as soon as possible.”

“Yes, we should,” the EMH said, standing at the control panel for the operating theater.

Beverly tried not to groan. “Computer, deactivate Emergency Medical Hologram.”
With an indignant bluster, the EMH disappeared into whatever abyss photonic beings disappeared into, leaving them blessedly in silence. When Beverly was sure he wasn’t coming back, she turned to her patient. “Deanna, I’d like you to come back here for observation tonight. I want to see if this repeats itself.”

The Betazoid’s brow furrowed. “If what repeats itself? Beverly, what happened to me?”

She swallowed hard before saying, “When Will brought you in here, you were completely nonresponsive. You were in a coma, Deanna. And then you woke up this morning as though nothing happened.”

Deanna’s dark eyes widened. She fumbled toward the retraction button for the clamshell. When she kept missing it, Beverly reached forward and triggered it for her. No sooner did the thing retract than Deanna sat upright.

“I was in a coma? Why?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out. Now, what I need to know is how many times he touched your skin.”

“Just the once in the transporter room. No, he took my hand when I tripped over a root in the arboretum. That’s all.”

Tapping her combadge, she said, “Crusher to Captain Picard.”

“Picard here, what can I do for you, Beverly?”

“Jean-Luc, I need to examine Envoy Sellassars as soon as possible.”

“You were supposed to see him this afternoon. May I ask why the urgency?”

Beverly took a deep breath before saying, “I have a feeling there’s something going on here, Jean-Luc. I’d prefer not to discuss it over an open comm channel.”

“I shall escort the envoy to see you myself. Picard out.”

Standing, Beverly realized that Riker was going to sleep the day away at this rate. Grabbing a hypospray of inaporovaline as she walked over to his biobed, she applied it to Riker’s neck. Slowly, he began to regain consciousness.

“What the…sickbay?”

“Yes, Will,” Beverly said. “Deanna is fine. I need you to take her back to her quarters and keep an eye on her; can you do that?”

Groggily, Will nodded. He managed to pull himself out of the bed, and over to where Deanna still sat on the central biobed. “What do you say,” he said. “Time for a day off?”

Troi smiled. “I think we’re under orders.”

“You’d better believe it,” Beverly said. “I’m putting both of you on reduced duty until we get to the summit. But don’t think this is going to get you out of rehearsals, Will.”

Riker groaned. “I know. I know. I’d have to die for that.”

As Beverly watched Will wrap an arm around Deanna’s waist and escort her to the sickbay door, she said, “Actually, Will, it would take more than that to get you out of rehearsals, and you know it.”

The last thing Beverly heard as the doors closed behind them was the sound of Riker’s laughter.
CHAPTER 5

Beverly spent every moment between the conversation with Jean-Luc and the arrival of the envoy in her office studying the readouts of Deanna’s tests. Her blood work was perfect. There was no sign of traumatic brain injury. No sign of skull fracture. Her metabolic readings were exactly where they should have been. Organ function was perfectly-frustratingly-normal.

The sickbay door opened to allow Jean-Luc and the envoy entrance. There was something slightly different about the envoy; he seemed to be stronger than when he’d beamed aboard, even-she dared think-a bit more luminous. The hunch in his shoulders had abated somewhat. “Envoy, please. Have a seat right here. The doctor will be out-“

“The doctor is here,” Beverly said, grabbing a medical tricorder as she walked over. “Please, Envoy, if you would lie down on this bed for a few moments, we can take some measure of your health.”

Sellassars’s melodic voice sounded far more peaceful than Beverly would have been in his position. “But, Doctor, were we not supposed to meet this afternoon?”

“Yes,” Beverly said, fighting to keep any accusation from her voice. “But circumstances seem to have dictated otherwise.”

Picard reached forward, allowing the Kendarayan to use his arm for support as he got onto the biobed. No sooner had Sellassars’s hand left his arm than Beverly leaned over and whispered in Jean-Luc’s ear, “Has he touched your skin?”

Picard quickly shook his head.

Beverly let a sigh of relief drift through her lips. “Envoy,” she began, turning toward Sellassars, “how many encounters with other species has your kind had?”

“Only the Dominion and those who serve them,” Sellassars replied.

“The Vorta?” Picard asked.

“Yes,” Sellassars said. “The Vorta, the Karemma, and many others-including the Jem’Hadar.”

“You have information that will help us battle them?”

While Jean-Luc had the envoy distracted, Beverly wheeled over a cart of testing equipment. Okay, Beverly, think. This is probably going to be the only chance at this you get. She grabbed a hypo, pressing it against what looked to be a vein on the inside of the envoy’s elbow. Surprisingly, it refused to extract any blood. She tried again, this time on the back of the envoy’s hand.

And had no luck there, either.

“Sellassars,” she said, “could I ask you a few questions?”

“Having difficulty with your kilogram of flesh, Dr. Crusher?” the envoy said. With his left hand, he ran his palm over the very same spot that Beverly had tried the first time. She raised an eyebrow at the fact that the skin was suddenly no longer iridescent, looking alarmingly human. “Make your attempt now, Doctor, quickly. Before they return to their posts.”

Beverly bit the question back, just long enough to get the hypospray to the Kendarayan’s skin. He was right. She was able to draw two vials of blood before the hypospray stopped working again. “Envoy, before what return to their posts?” she finally asked.

“What you see here as one being,” he said, gesturing toward his own body, “is merely an illusion made by your own eyes.”

“You are really two beings?” she asked. “One internal, and another external?”

Sellassars smiled, and she found the iridescence extended all the way to the enamel of his blue-green teeth.

“Yes, Doctor.”

“You are the dominant being?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “What we have is what you would call a ‘mutualistic’ relationship. Both life forms benefit from the relationship.”

Picard raised an eyebrow. “Sounds almost like the Trill.”

“No, Jean-Luc,” Beverly said. “I get the feeling the mutual benefit is far stronger with the Kendarayans than the Trill.”

Sellassars’s head tilted to the right. “Who are these Trill?”
“Well, Envoy,” Picard began, allowing Beverly to continue to work, “they are a species that looks like you or me…well, perhaps more like the doctor here and myself. Some Trill serve as hosts for a symbiotic organism that is far longer lived than the host. I understand that there is supposed to be a Trill representative at the summit. I’m sure there will be plenty of time to discuss the differences and similarities between your species.”

Beverly pulled a small microscope slide from the equipment table. “May I please take a sample of these creatures, Sellassars? I would like to study them to expand our own knowledge about how your species works.”

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that, Doctor,” he said.

Beverly tried not to allow her disappointment to reach her expression. “Why not?”

“It is my responsibility to protect the Barth, who share the universe with me,” he said. “They protect me from harm, and I do the same for them. That was why you couldn’t take a blood sample until I moved them, Doctor.”

“May I attempt to take a scanner over them, then?” she asked. “Something has happened to Counselor Troi, and—”

“And you suspect me,” Sellassars immediately replied. His normally glittering voice was dropping in tone, turning almost into the sound of rain dropping into a deep metallic cistern.

“No, of course not,” Beverly said. “I am merely trying to investigate all of my options. I want to make certain that she didn’t have an allergic reaction to the Barth, which accompany you.”

“The Barth mean no harm, Doctor. I can assure you of that. And I will not allow any of them to be removed from my body, as I’m certain you would not allow anyone to interfere with your own immune system.”

That got Jean-Luc’s curiosity going. “The Barth act as your immune system?”

Sellassars shook his head, and his hood slipped for a moment. Beverly got a glimpse of those same dark eyes, only this time the iridescent skin was crowned by hair that looked like liquid pearls flowing from his scalp. “You are amazing to look at,” she whispered.

“We thank you, Doctor. It is not often that we are able to discuss our co-existence with outsiders. They do not understand.”

Beverly felt her cheeks warm. “Well, I have some experience with symbiotic creatures. And you are like nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

“To answer your question, Captain, no. They do not act as our immune system. They protect us. They keep the smallest thing from entering our system unwanted. Imagine if the external layers of your skin were a sentient life-form.”

Picard gave a soft laugh. “There are days when I think they are, Envoy. Trust me.”

“Do you age?” Beverly asked. “Do the Barth stop the aging process for you?”

“No,” Sellassars’s voice twinkled. “We age, and we die, just like most species.”

“How long do you live?” Beverly asked.

Sellassars shifted on the biobed. “Thanks to the Barth, I am nearing my three hundredth anniversary. Oh, I remember a time when the Gamma Quadrant was so peaceful. I wish you could have seen it. Everything was clean, pristine, and wonderful.”

“I’m sure you do,” Picard said. “Beverly, are you finished?”

She checked her equipment tray and, save for the slide for the Barth samples, she had all that she needed. “Yes. Thank you, Sellassars. I would be very interested in hearing more about your culture some time, if your schedule permits it.”

The Kendarayan smiled again. “And I would love to learn more about your culture as well, Doctor.”

Perhaps another time,” Jean-Luc said, ushering Sellassars toward the door.

“Another time,” Beverly replied, watching the sickbay doors close behind them. That was when her eyes caught sight of the chronometer. Damn. I’m late for rehearsal. “Computer, activate Emergency Medical Hologram.”

The EMH materialized in the air behind her. “Please state the nature of the medical emergency.”

Before she could get another word out, the sickbay doors slid aside for Alyssa Ogawa. “What are you still doing here? Isn’t it time for rehearsal?”

“I’m trying to get down there now,” Beverly said. She handed one vial of Sellassars’s blood to Alyssa, putting the other in the one locked drawer in her office. “Run this through every test we have in the computer. Think of a few more if you can. I want to know everything you can find out from this. Don’t worry about anything, because we have two vials. I just want to keep the second one locked up to keep it safe.”

“Understood, Doctor.”

Beverly grabbed her blue overjacket, throwing it on over her uniform as she left. “And, please, try to help the EMH hone his bedside manner a bit. Counselor Troi’s scheduled to come in for observation tonight. Make sure you have a biobed set aside. Put every sensor in the book on her. If she slips into another coma, I want to know exactly where and when. And don’t hesitate to call me if you need me. Okay?”
Ogawa’s eyes took on a momentarily overworked look, then she smiled. “Get going, director.”
“Who are you?”
“Ask me who I was.”
“Who were you then?” Barclay said, pushing his practiced accent. “You’re particular, for a shade.”
Riker took a step forward. “In life, I was your partner, Jacob Marley.”
“Can you—can you sit down?” asked Barclay, giving him just the right dubious look.
“I can.”
“Do it, then.”
Riker worked his way across the stage to the chair opposite the fireplace. “You don’t believe in me.”
“I don’t,” Barclay replied.
Riker extended a hand out into the room. “What evidence would you have of my reality beyond that of your senses?”
“I don’t know,” said Barclay. Beverly didn’t know whether he was doing it intentionally, but he was curling into the bed like a child crawling away from the bogeyman, but not wanting to turn his eyes from the sight.
“Why do you doubt your senses?” Riker asked, sitting comfortably in his chair.
Barclay shook his head. “I’m sorry, Doctor, can I have a break, please?”
“All right, let’s take five. But when we get back, I want to move ahead a bit. I want us to start taking a stab at the Ghost of Christmas Past. Reg, we’ll start that when you’re in the zero-G harness.”
“Zero-G harness?” Beverly could hear him nervously swallowing from across the theater.
“It’s okay, Reg. I brought the anti-vertigo medication. If you get even the slightest bit queasy, I want you to take it. Understand?”
Reg quickly nodded. “There aren’t side effects to this, are there?
Beverly’s eyes darted to where Riker sat, a Cheshire cat grin on his features. “Don’t you dare, Will Riker,” she heard Deanna Troi say from the audience. “That wouldn’t be fair, and you know it.”
Riker’s smile faded, but just a bit. “She’s turning into her mother more and more every day.”
Beverly cringed, hoping that Deanna didn’t hear that. Judging by the fact that she was still sitting in the otherwise empty theater, she either hadn’t heard, or had heard and wisely chosen to ignore the comment. Those two are turning into an old married couple more and more every day. Wonder who’s going to give in first?
She was dragged out of that thought by the appearance of the hologram that was acting as the Ghost of Christmas Past. It swooped down and landed gently at her side. Beverly took it in with great pleasure; it was just as childlike as Dickens had dictated, yet just as much withered with age. Its long white hair was perfectly wraithlike, yet its body was full of the vitality of youth. The ghost’s white tunic was trimmed with summer flowers, but the pure white fabric still looked as though it would have the touch of a rose petal. For the first time since Beverly had begun this production, she was happy with what she saw in a character. Even though the Ghost of Christmas Past was the creation of a mind long gone, the idea that she could stand there and have a chat with it as though it were just another actor in her troupe made her a bit fonder of the holodeck as the new ship’s theater.
If we could just fine-tune the scene design, we’ve already got the virtual actors for the roles I can’t fill. It’s just a matter of bringing everything to life.
“Dr. Crusher to sickbay immediately. Medical emergency.”
She was beginning to dread that page. “All right, everyone. I want you to run through the scene with the Ghost of Christmas Past. Will, can you keep an eye on things until I get back?”
Riker nodded, and Beverly couldn’t help but notice that Deanna was falling asleep against Riker’s shoulder.
“Deanna?”
She didn’t respond.
“Deanna?”
Will tried to shake her awake, but it didn’t work. “Everyone, keep running lines until one of us gets back. I’ll be right behind you, Beverly,” he said, pulling Deanna into his arms and carrying her through the holodeck door.
CHAPTER 7

When Beverly reached sickbay, she was greeted by the sight of Jean-Luc’s unconscious body on the first biobed in the room. Alyssa was going over his readings with an utterly perplexed look on her face. “Jean-Luc. Alyssa, what happened?”

“He walked in saying something about having trouble sleeping. Before I could get him a somnetic inducer, he was out cold on the floor.”

“Yes,” the EMH coldly said, wandering in from her office. “This problem appears to be spreading.”

That was when it sank in for Beverly. Jean-Luc’s biobed wasn’t the only one occupied. Will laid Deanna down in the bed next to Jean-Luc’s, but La Forge was in the next bed, and Amarie, the resident musician/bartender in Ten-Forward, was flat on her back in the surgical biobed. All four of her arms were hanging limp at her sides.

“They’re all in comas?”

Ogawa nodded.

“Wait,” Beverly said, walking past the EMH and into her office. “This is the same time Deanna went into her first coma last night. What’s the connection between them, though?”

Will stood at the door to her office. “A bartender, an engineer, the captain, and the counselor. Where have they all been?”

That was when it occurred to Beverly. “Or who have they all touched?”

“Surely you don’t think?” the EMH began. “They can’t all have touched the envoy. That would be far more convenient than even I would like to admit.”

“Crusher to Data. Could you please escort the envoy to sickbay? I need to speak to him as soon as possible. Tell him there’s a medical situation on the ship, and I want to make sure he’s protected. I’m not sure the Barth will help him on this.”

“Yes, Doctor. I shall bring him to sickbay immediately.”

“Dr. Crusher?” Alyssa said. “None of them are-Commander Riker!”

Riker was losing consciousness, slowly sliding down the wall of Beverly’s office. Without even being asked, the EMH carried Riker to the one remaining empty biobed. “He’s comatose, as well.”

“None of them are entering REM sleep?” Beverly asked.

Ogawa shook her head.

“There’s something here, Alyssa. And I’ll bet it’s those damn Barth that he won’t let me look at. Computer, track the movements of Envoy Selllassars for the last eighteen hours.”

“Envoy Selllassars and Captain Jean-Luc Picard dined in Ten-Forward at 1800. The captain escorted Envoy Selllassars to engineering, where he was given a tour by Lieutenant Commander Geordi La Forge at 2000 hours. From that point, Envoy Selllassars returned to his quarters, where he remains.”

“Okay, he’s been in contact with everyone here,” Beverly said. “Everyone except Will. Alyssa, check Deanna’s readings, see how they measure up to last night. Then check the others. I have a feeling about something.”

Before she could take another step, the sickbay doors parted and Lieutenant Raisa Danilova stumbled into sickbay. “Doc,” she said, “having trouble-” Before she could finish, she collapsed into unconsciousness. A quick scan revealed the same comatose condition.

“Take her over there and keep an eye on her,” Beverly said, pointing the EMH toward a small chair in the corner. She was running out of beds, and fast. “Damn it,” Beverly said, “this is spreading like a cold.” Walking into her office, she said, “Crusher to bridge.”

“Bridge here, Doctor.” It was almost comforting to hear Lieutenant Commander Evan’s voice. At least there was still a sense of normalcy around the ship.

“Commander,” she began, “I know this is a bizarre question, but I need to ask. Has anyone on beta shift had trouble sleeping?”

There was a pause, and just as it slipped past the uncomfortable point, Evan’s voice replied, “No, ma’am. Everyone reports perfectly normal sleep, Doctor.”

“Nobody has fallen asleep at their post?”

“Not that I’m-wait a minute. Sanders? Doctor, Lieutenant Sanders is acting groggy, like he’s about to fall asleep.”
If Beverly’s memory served, Sanders was at tactical.
“Sanders is unconscious, ma’am. I’ll have him brought to sickbay immediately.”
Beverly looked around. “While you’re at it, could you send down a few more beds? We’re a little full here.”
That cinched it. She’d bet money that their sleep patterns matched Sellassars’s. “Thank you, Commander. Sickbay out.”
Okay, now how do I do this without creating an intergalactic incident? If he thinks we don’t trust him, how do we get him to trust us with information that might save the quadrant?
It was Alyssa’s yell that brought her back to reality.
“What’s wrong?” Beverly asked.
Ogawa pointed at Amarie—their four-handed bartender—and her lower right arm, which was giving a slight twitch about every thirty seconds.
“Okay, that’s new. How much do we know about her race?”
“Not much,” the nurse replied. “Commander Riker said she was the first of her kind he’d ever encountered. We’ve got all of the medical scans on her when she came on board, but really, that’s it.”
Beverly took samples of Deanna’s, Will’s, Jean-Luc’s, Geordi’s, Raisa’s, and Amarie’s blood, then retrieved the second vial of the envoy’s blood from the cabinet. From there, she headed into the lab. Instead of trusting the computer to compare the lot, she used the one thing she knew she could trust, her eyes. Slipping a microscopic slide of each blood sample under the scope, she compared it to the base-Sellassars’s blood. She went over them three times, every sample, comparing it to the envoy’s as closely as her eyes would allow. “There’s no connection. Nothing. Sellassars isn’t carrying anything that—”
“Doctor, I have brought the envoy as you requested,” Data’s voice said from the main sickbay.
“What am I doing here?” Sellassars’s jingling voice said. “I was sleeping peacefully when this gentleman said you needed me urgently, Doctor.”
When Beverly walked back into the sickbay, she was surprised to discover that every single one of her patients was awake. Groggy as anyone whose sleep had been interrupted, but they were awake. And Data stood amid them all, Sellassars’s hand in his.
“Envoy Sellassars,” Beverly said, making sure every bit of due deference she could manage was there. “I believe there may be an answer to the problems that are plaguing my crewmates. May I please take a sample of the Barth on your skin for examination?”
The Kendarayan’s coal-black eyes widened. “No, you may not. They are my protection. Take even one of them, and you damage me. I will not allow it.”
Beverly took a deep breath. You can do this. Just think like Jean-Luc. What would he do? “Then can you explain why people on this ship have been having sleep disturbances ever since you came on board? I have a half-dozen people here who’ve slipped into comas instead of just falling asleep. They wake up the next morning as though nothing happened. I can’t find anything medically wrong with them. The only common denominator here is that they’ve all somehow been in contact with you.”
Sellassars’s dark eyes looked directly into hers. “So have you. Have you been having the same sleep problems?”
Beverly was ready for that one. “No,” she calmly said. “But I also haven’t been in direct contact with your skin.”
“How do you know they have?”
He had a point. Beverly couldn’t ignore that fact. That’s when an image flashed in her mind, the image of Sellassars brushing his hand against Deanna’s cheek shortly after he’d come on board. “I know you touched Counselor Troi. And she was the first known victim of these sleep disturbances. Could she have passed something on without knowing it?”
Sellassars laughed, and it was like the tinkle of bells. “Anything is possible, child.”
Beverly’s jaw tightened as she caught Jean-Luc’s exhausted but present gaze. After taking a deep breath, her voice was hard as duranium when she asked, “What are the Barth, Envoy? What have you brought onto my ship?”
“They are harmless to you, Doctor, I assure you of that. Their sole purpose in life is to protect Kendarayans from any biological threat.”
She spared a glance toward Alyssa. “How often do they reproduce, these Barth?” Beverly asked.
“Often enough to continue protecting me on my journey through life. The Barth belong to the Dream Riders, Doctor. You would never comprehend.”
Alyssa, however, got the message just fine. She pulled Data aside, and ran a microscopic slide over his palm where it had contacted Sellassars’s flesh.
“Dream Riders?” Jean-Luc asked, pushing himself into a seated position. “We don’t have any information
about them in your culture. I would be fascinated to hear more.”

Sellassars smiled, those iridescent blue teeth sharp against his sparkling flesh. “The Dream Riders are quite special among my people, Captain,” he began. “We are people who don’t dream as others dream. Our bodies go through a process by which our metabolism slows, our brain functions ebb, and we float along the ether amid the great unknown. We are sometimes able to cross the barrier between life and death, using our gifts to carry messages to those Kendarayans who have gone before.”

La Forge leaned onto his side. “There have been stories of people who walk with the dead for centuries. You mean, your people can actually do it?”

Sellassars’s eyes turned down as he pulled his hood over his head. “Yes, though we are supposed to remain unknown to the rest of Kendaraya. It is feared that if the Dream Riders’ identities were known, we would be hunted.”

Beverly reached out and touched Sellassars’s shoulder. “But there is something about you that is allowing non-Kendarayans to approach death when they sleep, too. What is it?”

Sellassars shrugged, the gesture nearly lost in the play of light off his robes. “I do not know.”

“I think I might,” she said. Grabbing the slide from Alyssa, she quickly retreated to the lab. Sure enough, when she got a look at the Barth under the microscope, she saw exactly what she expected. “There’s an odd nucleotide in here. One that isn’t normal in the humanoid races of the Federation. I’m going to take a guess that that’s the reason you’re able to be a ‘Dream Rider,’ Sellassars.”

Beverly began pacing the lab, continuing to think aloud. “And like a germ on a child’s hand, it’s able to spread. If the Barth reproduce as fast as you slough off skin cells, then it wouldn’t take long for this nucleotide to spread.”

“And you wouldn’t even need to be there,” the EMH said.

“No, he wouldn’t,” she replied, backing the harshness in her voice with a glare toward the hologram. “Computer, deactivate Emergency Medical Hologram.”

The EMH was just beginning to protest as he faded from existence.

Beverly sighed with relief. She was beginning to hate that thing. “Computer, please send a quick message to Dr. Louis Zimmerman, Jupiter station. Message reads: Doctor, please re-work the personality matrix on the Mark 1 program before it goes into wider distribution. There are significant flaws with the program’s ego matrix. Message ends.”

Smiling, she turned to the envoy. “Now, all we need to do is figure out if we can deactivate this nucleotide without doing you or the Barth any harm in the process. That is, of course, if you’ll agree to help, Sellassars. This will allow your mission to be far more successful than it would have been.”

Sellassars looked around the sickbay. “I am responsible for all of you being here. And for that, I am truly sorry. Yet your willingness to help someone who has harmed so many here is humbling. Of course. I will render whatever assistance I am capable of rendering, Doctor.”
CHAPTER 8

“Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead,” said Reg Barclay, cutting quite the dramatic Scrooge figure on the holodeck’s stage. “But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with that you show me!”

The Ghost of Christmas Future, as Beverly had programmed into the holographic emitters, was a truly frightening spectre. Its deep black cloak concealed everything, leaving it to look like the dark ghost that it was. It played its part perfectly, solemnly pointing toward a tombstone while Reg slowly crept toward that same spot. Reg leaned over, reading out the name on the gravestone. “Ebenezer Scrooge!” he cried. His entire body began trembling as he fell to his knees.

Come on, Reg. You can hold this together.

“Am I the man who lay upon the bed?”

The Ghost pointed from the gravestone, to Reg, and then back again.

“No, Spirit! Oh no, no! Spirit! Hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past all hope?”

The Ghost’s hand began to tremble, precisely as Beverly had instructed it.

“Good Spirit,” Reg kept on, precisely on his marks, “your nature intercedes for me, and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life?”

Beverly allowed her inner director to take a back seat for a moment, watching the assembled crew, as well as Envoy Sellassars.

The smile fell from her face at the sight of the envoy, fully enrobed from head to toe, even-to both of their chagrin-his hands. But days of trial and error could not produce a way to negate the effects of the nucleotide sequence without destroying the protection that the Barth gave the Kendarayans. She managed to repair the damage done to the crew, but she couldn’t help feel sorry for Sellassars. He would be forever trapped by his own flesh. But still, he could sleep the sleep of death, and his dreams would ride that line for as long as he lived.

“He had no further intercourse with Spirits,” Data said from the center front of the stage, “but lived upon the Total Abstinence Principle, ever afterwards; and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God bless us, every one!”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TERRI OSBORNE’s previous sojourns in the Star Trek universe include four eBooks-Malefictorum (the landmark fiftieth installment of the S.C.E. series), Progress (which kicked off the six-part What’s Past miniseries), and the two-part Remembrance of Things Past (a Next Generation/Corps of Engineers crossover)-and three short stories-“Three Sides to Every Story” in the Deep Space Nine anthology Prophecy and Change, “‘Q’uandary” in the New Frontier anthology No Limits, and “Eighteen Minutes” in the Voyager anthology Distant Shores. Forthcoming is the story “Good Queen, Bad Queen, I Queen, You Queen” in the Doctor Who: Short Trips anthology The Quality of Leadership, due out in the spring of 2008. Terri is also working on several other projects that will take her to the Ireland of the past, the Mars of the future, and other places both near and far. Find out more at her website at www.terriosborne.com.
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