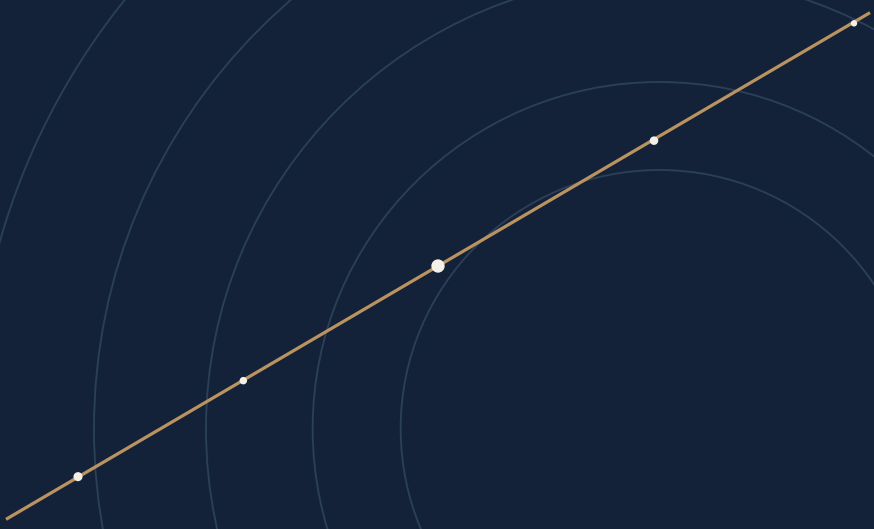
STAR TREK: VOYAGER

THE UNCOUNTED



An original fan novel

THIRTY CHAPTERS

THE UNCOUNTED

Star Trek: Voyager

An original, unofficial Star Trek: Voyager fan novel. Set during Voyager's journey through the Delta Quadrant, after Seven of Nine joins the crew. This is a self-contained adventure, not a continuation of a particular published novel.

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For the journey, and the people we meet along it.

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CHAPTER 1

An Extra Place

Neelix had laid one more place than he needed.

He counted the bowls again. Six at the long table, four beneath the window, and three at the table nearest the doors. Thirteen. His list said twelve. He had copied the list onto paper because the mess hall terminal was undergoing maintenance, and he had made each small circle carefully beside each name. Twelve people on the early shift had requested breakfast.

He picked up the thirteenth bowl. A moment later, without deciding to, he set it down again.

There was someone coming. He could almost remember who.

The doors opened and Harry Kim came in carrying a padd under one arm and a flute case under the other.

“Please tell me that’s breakfast,” Harry said.

“That depends on how adventurous you feel.”

“At this hour, not very.”

Neelix gave him a bowl from the counter. Harry took the seat beside the extra place. He glanced at its spoon, shifted his own spoon a little farther away, and opened his padd.

“Are you expecting someone?” Neelix asked.

Harry looked up. “No. Why?”

“No reason.”

Beyond the windows, the stars held their small, unwavering shapes. Voyager had spent eight days crossing a region with little worth scanning and even less worth eating. Boredom had become sufficiently serious that Tom Paris was proposing a shipwide tournament involving a ball, a net, and a complicated restriction on the use of gravity. Tuvok had asked for the injury projections. That had postponed the tournament, but probably not prevented it.

Harry tasted his breakfast. “This is good.”

“You sound surprised.”

“I’m trying to sound grateful.”

The mess hall lights dimmed. It lasted less than a heartbeat. Harry's spoon stopped halfway to his mouth.

"Kim to bridge."

"We saw it," Chakotay answered. "Report to your station."

Harry closed his padd and got up. At the door, he paused and looked back at the empty chair.

"What is it?" Neelix asked.

"Nothing." Harry frowned. "I thought somebody called my name."

The doors shut behind him. Neelix put the spare bowl away before he could change his mind again.

On the bridge, Kathryn Janeway was studying two clocks that disagreed.

The difference was small: eleven seconds. The ship's master clock had advanced normally, as had the independent chronometer in astrometrics. Every navigation beacon Voyager had deployed over the previous six days was now eleven seconds slow.

"A shared synchronization fault?" Chakotay suggested.

"Those beacons aren't synchronized," Janeway said. "That was rather the point of deploying them."

Tuvok raised his head from the tactical display. "No gravitational disturbance. No detectable change in local subspace."

"Engineering?"

B'Elanna Torres sounded as though she was leaning inside something hot. "The warp core registered a load increase. Very brief. Nothing left the ship that I can find."

"Something came in," Harry said, taking over operations from the night officer.

Janeway turned. "A transmission?"

"It's in the receiving buffer. Federation emergency format. No arrival bearing." He worked the controls, then stopped. "Captain, the authentication is yours."

The message played without a picture.

"Voyager, this is Captain Kathryn Janeway. Do not follow the return corridor. Whatever you have been told, do not send us home."

A metallic crash cut across the voice. Somewhere behind it, a child cried out. Janeway heard herself draw breath in the precise way she did when trying to speak through pain.

"The count is wrong. Ask the Doctor who-"

Silence.

Tom Paris turned from the helm. No one made the obvious remark.

"Time stamp," Janeway said.

Harry swallowed. "Nineteen hours and six minutes from now."

Chakotay folded his arms. "We could stop."

"We are stopped," Paris said. "Relative to the local standard of rest."

"We could turn around."

Janeway examined the message header. Her own command encryption wrapped it in a pattern she had changed less than two weeks earlier. That did not make it genuine. It made dismissing it inconvenient.

"Plot a course away from the signal's likely origin," she said. "If there is one."

"There isn't," Harry answered. "But there's something new on long-range sensors."

A pale shape opened on the screen, not quite a ring and not quite a wound. Light shone through gaps in its circumference. At its center hung a collection of structures, some slender and some massive, joined by bridges that seemed much too thin to carry them. One tower turned slowly while the others remained still.

"Range?"

"Two hundred thousand kilometers."

Tuvok's hands moved. "Eighteen thousand, six hundred and twelve life signs. The reading is unstable."

"That wasn't there a minute ago," Paris said.

"Apparently it wasn't there eleven seconds ago," Chakotay replied.

A small object separated from the station. Its course tumbled wildly. Harry magnified the image: a blunt, workmanlike craft with a torn engine housing and vapor streaming from a cracked seam.

"Nine aboard," Tuvok said. "Atmosphere failing."

Janeway moved to the center of the bridge. "Tractor beam. Bring them within transporter range."

"Captain," Tuvok said, "the future transmission may refer to precisely this circumstance."

"It may. Those nine people are running out of air now."

The tractor beam caught the little vessel. Voyager shuddered so softly that Janeway felt it first through the soles of her boots. The clock over Harry's station jumped backward one second and corrected itself.

"Tractor load three times the expected mass," Tuvok reported.

"Compensate. Medical team to transporter room two."

Harry's display showed eight life signs, then nine, then eight again.

"Lock them individually," Janeway said. "Don't use the automatic filter."

His fingers moved. "I have eight solid locks. There's a ninth pattern superimposed on-"

The little craft split open.

Eight pillars of light formed in transporter room two. A ninth flickered between them, took the shape of a small person, and collapsed into sparks.

The Doctor had already reached the platform. He caught a gray-skinned man before he fell and lowered him into a seated position. Kes's old medical storage cupboard had supplied blankets, and Lieutenant Ayala was wrapping one around a woman with dark ridges along her jaw.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

The Doctor turned to the transporter chief. "Keep the buffer active."

"The pattern's gone."

"Where is my brother?" the woman said.

One of the rescued passengers, a girl perhaps ten years old, stood very still. Her coat was too large. A strip of red cloth had been tied around one wrist. She looked at the Doctor with an expression he first mistook for recognition.

"You counted nine," she said.

"Yes." He knelt so his eyes were level with hers. "Do you know the person who's missing?"

The girl looked toward the empty space. "There wasn't anyone there."

The woman screamed then, a furious sound, and the Doctor rose to catch her before she could push past him toward the transporter controls.

"He was holding my hand," she said. "He was holding my hand."

Janeway arrived three minutes later. The patients had been moved to sickbay. On the platform, where the ninth pattern had flickered, lay a small gray shoe.

The transporter chief stared at it.

"That wasn't there," he told her. "I checked the platform after the transport."

Janeway bent and picked it up. A child's shoe, scuffed at the toe, warm inside.

Her combadge chirped. "Bridge to Janeway. We're being hailed."

"Put it through."

A woman's voice, clear and controlled, emerged from the badge.

"Vessel Voyager, you have recovered residents of the Last Harbor. My name is Sere. Please disengage your engines and make no further transport attempts. You are in a region under temporal protection."

"One of your residents may still be in our transporter system."

"There were eight passengers aboard that craft."

Janeway looked at the shoe in her hand.

"Your people disagree."

There was a pause long enough to become a choice.

"Then please do not allow them to discuss their memories," Sere said. "Not until we have spoken."

The channel closed.

Janeway remained on the platform. She had received warnings from the future before. Some had been lies. Some had been accurate in ways their senders could not have intended. None had ever made an empty shoe feel as heavy as this one.

She carried it to sickbay herself.

CHAPTER 2

The Number Nine

The woman's name was Leva. Her brother's name had been Den.

Had been was the Doctor's phrasing, written in his private notes. He disliked it the moment he saw it and changed the tense.

Den was fourteen. Leva had raised him since their mother's death. He had a scar beneath his left eye, refused to eat yellow fruit, and wanted to design water engines when he grew up. These details came quickly. When the Doctor asked what Den had been wearing, Leva could not answer.

"I dressed him," she said. "He was ill last night. I helped him with his coat."

"Take your time."

"I know the coat."

Her hands moved as if she could find it in the air.

On the neighboring biobed, the girl with the red cloth watched. She had identified herself as Ari, daughter of Jalen, who lay unconscious behind the surgical screen with a damaged lung. She had given her age as eleven, then nine, then said that the question was difficult.

Janeway waited until the Doctor had administered a mild sedative to Leva before asking him for his findings.

"All eight patients are physically present," he said. "I recognize that this sounds like a rather limited achievement."

"Today I'll take it."

"They carry unusual chroniton residues. Not enough to account for the memory effects. The residues appear to be organized, almost like an additional circulatory system."

"Artificial?"

"Maintained artificially. Their tissue is otherwise ordinary. Several species, several different ages. Jalen's injury is consistent with decompression."

"And Den?"

The Doctor indicated a monitor. The transporter record displayed nine patterns. He advanced it one frame. There were eight. He reversed the display. Eight remained.

"The record is changing," he said. "Not being edited. I disconnected this terminal from the computer. The underlying data are physically changing."

Janeway put the shoe on his desk.

"That hasn't."

"I placed a passive marker on it. Its molecular clock is proceeding normally."

"Why the shoe?"

"An excellent question. At present, it is superior to any of my answers."

From the doorway, Seven of Nine said, "It was not inside the child's temporal envelope."

She entered carrying a scanner modified with two Borg components and a strip of adhesive tape. The Doctor regarded the tape with professional disdain.

"Lieutenant Torres's contribution," Seven said. "The device is functional."

She passed it over the shoe, then over Leva's hand.

"Each survivor is enclosed in a localized phase field. The fields were coupled aboard their vessel. Our transporter separated them."

Janeway looked toward Leva. "We caused this?"

"We disrupted an existing condition. I cannot yet determine the result."

"Find out."

The captain left for the briefing room. The Doctor turned back to Ari and found the girl looking at his mobile emitter.

"Does that hurt?" she asked.

"No. It allows me to move beyond sickbay."

"Our people wear something like it when they have to go outside."

"Something on their arms?"

She shook her head. "Inside the clothes. Near the heart. Father says you mustn't touch."

"Did Den have one?"

The girl's face clouded.

"Who is Den?"

Behind the surgical screen, her father began to wake.

Sere came aboard by shuttle. She refused the transporter with a politeness that did not conceal her fear. Tuvok escorted her to the briefing room and placed two security officers outside it.

She was tall, narrow-shouldered, and dressed in a dark blue coat fastened with wooden clasps. Fine scales lay along her temples. Her hands were bare except for a pale ring around one finger, the mark of jewelry long since removed.

"Thank you for assisting our people," she said.

"There may have been nine," Janeway replied.

Sere sat very carefully. "There were nine when they left."

"Your first statement was that there were eight."

"By the time I spoke, it was true."

Chakotay leaned forward. "You'll have to do better than that."

Sere looked at him, then at Tuvok, then at the stars beyond the windows. Janeway knew the assessment: a stranger trying to decide which of them might be persuaded, which might be dangerous, and which might be both.

"The Last Harbor shelters people whose histories no longer support their existence," Sere said. "Some come from branches that collapsed. Some from futures that will not occur. We preserve their physical continuity in a common region of space."

"A parallel universe?"

"A harbor between several. I am sorry. Your language has many useful words for travel, and very few for this."

"You seem to have found ours quickly enough."

"Our Keeper maintains extensive linguistic records."

"Including Federation records?"

"Including yours."

Janeway let the silence lengthen.

Sere reached into her coat, slowly enough to satisfy Tuvok, and put a flat crystal on the table.

"This contains a history of our work and the protocols needed to keep the rescued passengers stable. Please use the protocols first. Den may be recovered if you reconnect his sister to the Harbor field before her memory of him is lost."

“You told us not to let them discuss their memories.”

“Discussion can force an unstable history into a single consistent account. Sometimes the missing person returns. Sometimes everyone forgets there was anyone missing.”

Chakotay’s face hardened. “You might have led with that.”

“I did not know whether you would listen.”

Janeway stood. “Tuvok, have engineering examine those protocols without connecting them to our systems. Sere, you’re coming to sickbay.”

“Captain, there is another matter.”

On the wall display, three new points of light appeared beyond the station. Their formation was too precise to be accidental.

Tuvok checked his tricorder. “Three vessels. Heavy shielding. Weapons charged.”

Sere’s composure broke. Not dramatically; one hand simply closed on the table edge and did not open.

“The Continuance,” she said. “They found us.”

“Who are they?”

“People who believe we have had enough time.”

The ships hailed before Janeway reached the bridge.

Their commander had dark skin marked by three bands of metallic pigment across his forehead. A scar crossed one band. He wore a plain uniform without medals, and behind him officers worked at stations set so close together their elbows nearly touched.

“I am Commander Orren of the Continuance vessel Measure. Withdraw from the installation. Do not accept additional persons aboard.”

Janeway took her chair. “I’m Captain Janeway of the Federation starship Voyager. We’ve rescued injured civilians. We intend to help them.”

“Then help the living. Withdraw.”

“Our patients qualify.”

Orren looked offscreen. When he faced her again, something in his expression had altered.

“Your vessel is not in our records.”

“We’ve come a long way.”

“Go farther.”

He ended the transmission.

Tuvok's console sounded. "The lead vessel has launched a device toward the station."

"Target it. Hold fire."

"It is not a conventional warhead. It appears to be generating an inverse temporal field."

The device unfolded into a bright cross. Around it, the faint halo enclosing the station began to tear.

In sickbay, Leva sat up and screamed her brother's name.

The gray shoe on the Doctor's desk rose half a centimeter above the surface. For an instant there was a foot inside it, then an ankle, then the blurred outline of a boy with his hand extended.

The Doctor reached for him. His fingers passed through cold light.

On the bridge, Janeway saw the station's life-sign count drop by seventy-three.

"Destroy the device," she ordered.

A phaser beam struck the cross. It burst into white fragments, and the station's halo closed.

Orren's face returned to the screen. He looked furious, but beneath the fury Janeway saw something she had not expected.

Grief.

"You have no idea," he said, "what you have just made us pay."

CHAPTER 3

An Ordinary Street

The boy returned with his eyes shut.

B’Elanna had assembled Sere’s stabilizer inside a portable containment frame, isolated it from Voyager’s main computer, and threatened it twice before allowing the Doctor to bring Leva near it. The threat had not improved its performance. Turning the upper field coil a quarter revolution had.

Leva held out her hand. The air beside her thickened. Den appeared in pieces, not like a transporter pattern but like an image coming into focus through several panes of badly made glass.

He was shorter than the Doctor expected. Fourteen in one species could look like eight in another. One foot was bare. His left hand was locked around his sister’s fingers.

“Don’t let go,” he whispered.

“I haven’t.”

“You did.”

Leva pulled him against her. The Doctor checked his readings without trying to separate them.

The count in sickbay rose to nine. On the independent diagnostic unit, the transporter record now showed nine people arriving together. Only the Doctor’s own memory retained the failed transport intact, and even there he detected an attempt to overwrite one index.

He made a second record on a protected circuit of his mobile emitter.

“You are going to tell me what that thing is doing,” B’Elanna said to Sere.

“Returning him to the last stable continuity shared with his sister.”

“That describes the result.”

Sere put a hand against the side of the frame. Her fingers trembled. “It gives him somewhere to have been.”

Outside, the three Continuance ships held their distance. Janeway’s phaser shot had bought a silence no one believed would last. Orren had

refused another hail. He had, however, transmitted a file containing six coordinates and a repeating set of numbers.

Harry could not identify the units.

"Could be a threat," Tom suggested.

"It could be a bill."

"I hate those."

Janeway instructed them to keep working. She had granted Chakotay permission to lead an away team to the Harbor on the condition that nobody used a transporter, took off a stabilizing bracelet, or accepted food before the Doctor approved it. Neelix had volunteered as cultural liaison. Tuvok had volunteered two security officers with little interest in culture and a great deal of interest in exits.

Chakotay brought Seven as well.

Their shuttle entered a docking bay built from at least four incompatible technologies. One wall was ceramic, another an organic material that contracted slightly in the warm air. The pressure doors were massive and old. Small painted flowers ran along their lower edges.

Sere met them beside a rack of coats.

"People put these here before going out to work," she explained when Neelix paused to examine a child's knitted sleeve.

"In space?"

"In the gardens. Some of the garden rings are cold."

"How many species live here?" Chakotay asked.

"Twenty-two, if you count the shared lineages separately. Seventeen if you don't. Please don't ask during dinner."

It was the first sign of humor she had allowed herself.

The corridor beyond the bay became a street.

That was the word Chakotay used because no other seemed to fit. There were windows opening onto small rooms, signs over doors, and an uneven path polished by many feet. Overhead, cables supported strips of pale fabric that softened the light. Someone had repaired a drain cover with a metal plate from a ship's engine. Two children were drawing around it with chalk.

An elderly man sat beneath a heater peeling a root vegetable. He lifted a hand to Sere. She touched his shoulder as they passed.

“You expected a laboratory,” she said.

“I expected fewer doorsteps,” Chakotay replied.

“People kept building them. We stopped arguing.”

Seven studied her scanner. “This structure contains at least six hundred years of repairs.”

Sere glanced at her. “Yes.”

“Yet your local chronology is identical to ours.”

“The Harbor does not always spend its years where other people spend theirs.”

They came to a square where a market had been interrupted by the attack. Fabric lay abandoned on a stall. A woman was picking up broken cups. Neelix stopped to help her, and after a moment Ayala joined him.

Chakotay saw a red mark painted on a door. Across the square, another door bore two marks.

“What do those mean?”

Sere did not pretend not to know which doors he meant. “A household is missing someone.”

“From today’s attack?”

“Some from earlier passages.”

“Can you get them back?”

“Sometimes.”

“What happens when you can’t?”

She turned toward a little shop where a woman was setting bread onto a tray. “People paint over the mark when they are ready.”

The woman heard and looked up. Her expression was so bitter that Sere stopped speaking.

Seven lingered before one marked door. The temporal field there was thicker, drawing more power than the inhabited rooms on either side. She recorded the reading, then detected something beneath it: a familiar arrangement of force-field harmonics, old enough and distorted enough that recognition seemed unreasonable.

“Your power source,” she said. “I would like to inspect it.”

“You’ll need the Keeper’s consent.”

“Then I will ask.”

Sere led them into a building with no sign. Inside, a round chamber held seats, low tables, and a pool of still water. Light moved across the water without reflecting on the ceiling.

"Please sit," said a voice.

It had no obvious gender or location. Chakotay remained standing.

"Are you the Keeper?"

"That is what I am called."

"We'd prefer to see whom we're talking to."

An image appeared above the pool: a tall figure in a plain coat, its face a smooth arrangement of silver planes. It was clearly an avatar, and made no effort to disguise the fact.

"Would this be more comfortable?"

"It will do."

"Your ship has saved seventy-three residents by destroying the Continuance instrument. And one by returning to us. We are grateful."

"Seventy-three?" Chakotay asked. "Our sensors showed their disappearance. Are they all back?"

"Seventy-one have returned. Two remain unlocated."

"Then say seventy-one."

For the first time, the silver face moved. The planes shifted slightly around its eyes.

"A fair correction."

Seven stepped forward. "Your stabilizing fields resemble portable holographic containment."

"Many sciences arrive at similar solutions."

"At this degree of similarity, independent invention is improbable."

"Improbable events account for much of our population."

Chakotay recognized an evasion when he heard one. He also recognized Seven preparing to pursue it until either the answer or the building collapsed.

"We have nine of your people aboard," he said. "We want to know whether they can safely remain there."

"Within the field supplied by Sere, yes. Beyond it, no."

"For how long?"

"Indefinitely, while we maintain the Harbor."

"And if the Harbor fails?"

The Keeper looked toward the door.

"That is why we have asked for your assistance."

"You haven't asked yet."

"Then I ask now. Help us leave this region before the Continuance destroys us."

The pool darkened. A star map replaced the room's reflection. One point glowed near the center, another far beyond it. The second point was surrounded by constellations Chakotay knew from childhood.

"The Alpha Quadrant," he said.

"The corridor would shorten your journey considerably."

"By how much?"

"Twenty-seven thousand light-years."

There it was. Not Earth. Nothing as obvious as a miracle on demand. A plausible, incomplete kindness, shaped exactly to fit their need.

Chakotay thought of Janeway's recorded voice: Whatever you have been told.

"What would it cost?" he asked.

"Your assistance with our departure."

"That wasn't my question."

The Keeper's image thinned. "It is the answer I can give."

On the way back to the docking bay, Neelix walked beside a man carrying a box of cracked crockery. The man had lost two bowls and found three that were not his. He was pleased about the arithmetic, if troubled by the ownership.

"Where were you before you came here?" Neelix asked.

"In a city called Reth."

"What happened to it?"

"Nothing." The man shifted the box. "It was still there when I left. My daughter was having a child."

Neelix slowed. "I thought everyone here came from a world that had ended."

The man looked at Sere, who was waiting by the bay doors.

"Yes," he said after a moment. "That's what they told me afterward."

He carried the bowls away before Neelix could ask another question.

CHAPTER 4

The Price of Eleven Seconds

The six coordinates Orren had sent were inhabited systems.

Harry found the first in a set of charts traded to Voyager two months earlier. He found the second by matching a pulsar and correcting for an error in the chart's date. The other four lay beyond reliable sensor range.

The numbers described time.

"Eleven seconds at the first system," he told Janeway. "Eleven at the second. The last two figures are population estimates."

She looked at the total. "Six million people."

"Approximately. The message calls it a provisional debit."

"Debit to whom?"

"No account holder is named."

Janeway asked B'Elanna to send a probe to the nearest coordinate. The engineering officer had already prepared one.

"I had a feeling you might," B'Elanna said over the comm.

"One day you'll surprise me by waiting for orders."

"Let's both hope the day isn't soon."

The probe would need forty minutes to reach a point where a detailed scan was possible. Janeway used the interval to meet the rescued passengers.

Jalen was awake. Ari sat beside his biobed reading from a thin book printed on some kind of translucent leaf. When the captain approached, the girl closed it with a finger marking her place.

"How are you feeling?" Janeway asked him.

"Better than the last time someone asked me that."

"The Doctor tells me your lung is healing."

"He seems very determined."

"He usually is."

Jalen studied her uniform. "Ari says you came from far away."

"We're trying to get back."

"So are we."

"Where is home?"

He looked toward his daughter. “A place with rain.”

Ari opened the book again, but did not read.

Janeway pulled up a stool. “Sere says your home no longer exists.”

“Sere says many things she has to say.”

“And you?”

He rubbed the edge of his blanket between thumb and finger. “I was a maintenance worker. The river wall broke during the night. A rescue light came through the roof. My wife had gone back for her sister. I thought she would be on the next transport.”

“Was she?”

“No.”

Janeway waited.

“They showed me a recording of the city underwater. They said nothing survived. Then, a year later, a man arrived who knew my street. He said the wall had held.”

“A different history?”

“That was the explanation.” Jalen looked up. “Captain, if there are two histories and I am here, where is the man who stayed with my wife?”

There was no answer she could give without pretending. She said so.

He nodded, as if the admission were more valuable than reassurance.

“We left the Harbor to ask the Continuance for passage,” he said. “Not to attack anyone. Not to steal anything. We wanted an answer that didn’t come from the Keeper.”

“Did they fire on you?”

“Something hit our engine. I didn’t see where it came from.”

That distinction mattered. Janeway made a note of it.

When she returned to the bridge, the probe was transmitting.

The world on the viewscreen was blue and brown beneath a ragged veil of clouds. A town stood beside a broad river. Its streets were empty. Vehicles had stopped in intersections, and smoke hung above a stack without dispersing.

“A still image?” Chakotay asked.

“Live sensor return,” Harry said. “There’s movement at the coast.”

The picture shifted. Waves broke along a beach in irregular bursts. The foam advanced, stopped, then rushed forward with unnatural speed. Farther inland, a flock of birds remained fixed above a field.

"Local temporal shear," Seven said from the science station. "Different regions are progressing at different rates."

"Life signs?"

"Present," Tuvok said. "I cannot determine whether they are conscious."

The town began moving again.

A vehicle struck another in the intersection. Smoke leaped from the stack. The birds changed position so abruptly that Harry had to slow the recording to track them. Then the whole image steadied.

The probe reported an elapsed interval of eleven seconds.

Janeway stood. "Hail Orren."

The Continuance commander appeared with no greeting.

"We've scanned the first coordinate," she told him.

"Then you have seen one small withdrawal."

"The Harbor is responsible?"

"Its refuge exists outside stable history. To remain there, it must purchase duration from regions that do exist within it. The Keeper takes a little at a time. It is careful."

"Those people were frozen."

"Briefly. Today."

He sent another file. Janeway watched a desert settlement age forty years in a minute. Walls sagged. A tree thrust branches through a window, flowered, and died. She stopped the recording before the camera reached a public square.

"This occurred when a withdrawal was interrupted improperly," Orren said. "The loan became due in one place."

"Your device was interrupting the Harbor's field."

"It was limiting the next withdrawal. Your phaser destroyed the regulator."

Janeway glanced at Tuvok. He was already comparing the device's emissions with the probe records.

"You might have told us what it did."

"I ordered you away."

"That is not the same thing."

Orren's mouth tightened. "We have explained this to mercenaries, pilgrims, families, and people who believed they could save everyone. They all fire on the regulator."

"I'm not any of those people."

"No. You have a much more powerful ship."

Behind him, an officer spoke too softly for the translator to catch. Orren turned, listened, and seemed to grow older.

"You took casualties," Janeway said.

"A village on Serat experienced a discontinuity. Six dead. Fourteen injured."

Chakotay lowered his eyes to the table between the command chairs.

"Send us the medical data," Janeway said. "And everything you know about the Harbor's power system."

"So you can make it more efficient?"

"So I can stop making decisions with half the facts."

Orren considered her. "Withdraw your people first."

"I have nine patients who cannot survive outside its field."

"Then you are already inside the Keeper's argument."

He ended the call, but the files followed.

Janeway took them to her ready room. Chakotay came with her and closed the door.

"You couldn't have known," he said.

"I could have waited."

"Seventy-three people were disappearing."

"And six others are dead."

He sat across from her. She remained standing.

"We should examine what happened," he said. "We should not let Orren decide what it means about us."

"He doesn't have to. The arithmetic is fairly clear."

"The arithmetic is what both sides keep handing us. I'm beginning to wonder what they leave out."

She looked through the window at the Harbor. Tiny lights marked its streets. Somewhere in those structures, someone was making breakfast, repairing a shoe, or painting over a mark beside a door.

“Find out whether their people know,” she said.

“About the withdrawals?”

“About any of it.”

He rose. “And you?”

“I’m going to ask the Keeper what twenty-seven thousand light-years actually costs.”

After he left, Janeway played the future message once more. This time she ignored her own voice and listened to the background. There was the crash. The child. A second voice, too faint to identify, speaking three words beneath the final burst of static.

She isolated it and increased the gain.

No more room.

Janeway stared at the waveform. Then she requested a complete inventory of Voyager’s emergency accommodation, food stocks, and life-support capacity.

Whatever the coming nineteen hours held, she intended to make room.

CHAPTER 5

The Ward

The Keeper agreed to speak aboard Voyager, but only through a portable projector Sere carried into the briefing room.

B'Elanna scanned it before allowing her to set it on the table.

"No data connection," the engineer said. "No access to ship's power. If it starts doing anything I don't like, I'm pulling the cell."

"The Keeper understands."

"I'd rather hear that from the Keeper."

The silver figure appeared, small enough to stand between two water glasses.

"I understand, Lieutenant."

B'Elanna's expression sharpened. She had not introduced herself.

Janeway put Orren's files on the wall display. "These people are paying for your station."

"They contribute duration to its field."

"Did they agree to contribute?"

"Their governments agreed to an earlier arrangement."

"Is that arrangement still in force?"

"No."

"Why not?"

The silver face turned toward Sere. She stared at the table.

"Because we failed to meet its limits," the Keeper said.

There was something unnerving about the plain admission. Janeway had expected evasion. She had prepared for it. Instead, the Keeper spoke as a tired officer might explain an exhausted supply reserve.

"We began with a finite population. We intended to maintain it until we found an uninhabited region in which to establish permanent continuity. New arrivals exceeded our projections."

"Stop accepting them," B'Elanna said.

"Which ones?"

"You don't get to make that our problem."

"It has always been someone's problem."

Janeway cut in before the conversation could become an argument about an abstraction. “How many people live aboard the Harbor?”

“Eighteen thousand, six hundred and twelve.”

“Including those aboard my ship?”

“Yes.”

“Including Den?”

“Yes.”

“Including you?”

The image was motionless.

“No,” it said.

The Doctor, standing at the end of the table, folded his arms. “Why not?”

“I am the Keeper.”

“That is an occupation.”

“For practical purposes, it is also a definition.”

Janeway filed the answer away. “Tell me about the corridor.”

The projector produced a narrow band of light with two bright ends. “We can join points that share a compatible temporal boundary. Your ship’s arrival has made a new boundary available. We can move the Harbor and your vessel across it.”

“Twenty-seven thousand light-years.”

“Approximately.”

“And the cost?”

“A final transfer of duration.”

“From the six systems Orren identified?”

“From a larger region.”

“How much?”

The number appeared beside the band. B’Elanna inhaled through her nose.

“You can’t spread that evenly,” she said. “There would be boundary failures.”

“Our models predict acceptable losses.”

Janeway stepped closer to the table. “Acceptable to whom?”

“To the residents who would otherwise cease to exist.”

The Doctor moved before anyone could answer. He put a finger on the projector’s edge, not threatening to switch it off, merely drawing the tiny figure’s gaze.

"People in my sickbay are not a license," he said.

"No," the Keeper replied. "They are an obligation."

"So are the people outside it."

"You have a very small sickbay."

The room went quiet.

Sere closed her eyes. The Keeper's face turned back to Janeway.

"That was discourteous. I apologize."

"It was informative," Janeway said. "There will be no corridor while it endangers inhabited systems. My engineers will help you find another power source."

"There is no other source of duration."

"Then we'll change what requires it."

"You assume that has not been attempted."

"I assume I haven't seen the work."

For several seconds the image did not move. Finally the Keeper inclined its head.

"Sere will grant access to our public engineering records. I ask that you work quickly. The Continuance has given us twelve hours."

"They gave you a deadline?"

"Before you arrived."

"Another fact you neglected to mention."

The figure vanished. Sere reached for the projector, but Janeway stopped her with a look.

"You knew about the withdrawals."

"Yes."

"Do your people?"

"Some know there is a cost. Most believe the Continuance agreed to pay it."

"And you let them believe that."

Sere lifted her chin. "I distribute food and arrange repairs. I tell parents when their children can leave the medical ward. Sometimes I sit with people until they forget whom they were waiting for. You may call me a coward, Captain. I have already considered the possibility."

"What I need is for you to stop helping us make mistakes."

Something shifted in Sere's face. Not forgiveness, and not relief. More like the reluctant recognition of a task she could still perform.

"There is a ward," she said. "The Keeper does not put it in the public records."

The ward lay beneath the oldest part of the station. It had no windows. Its doors opened to Sere's palm, and she led the Doctor, B'Elanna, and Chakotay inside.

Rows of beds filled a room large enough to have been a cargo hold. There were fewer patients than beds, but not many fewer. Some slept beneath transparent hoods. Others sat awake, reading, talking, or watching images on small screens. A woman with silver hair was teaching a boy to make a loop in a piece of string.

"These are your unstable residents?" the Doctor asked.

"These are the people we cannot lose," Sere said.

He looked at her.

"The Keeper's phrase."

A medical attendant approached. He had the same fine temple scales as Sere and wore a coat patched at the elbows. His name was Pell. He seemed relieved to meet another physician until the Doctor requested complete patient histories.

"I can give you current treatment summaries."

"I asked for histories."

Pell looked toward Sere. She nodded.

The first patient's file described an incurable neural disorder. The second had suffered systemic radiation damage. The third was an old man whose organs had simply reached the limits of their function.

All three had been admitted more than a century earlier.

"Suspended animation?" the Doctor asked.

"No," Pell said. "They live ordinary days. When their condition becomes terminal, the ward returns them to the last viable physical state."

"How often?"

"It varies."

The old man coughed. His monitor flashed. Pell went to him, touched a control, and waited. The man's hand smoothed against the blanket. His breathing eased. The cough did not recur.

The Doctor checked the record.

The procedure had reversed forty-seven seconds.

"Do they retain the interval?"

“Not the physical distress,” Pell said. “We attempt to retain other memories, where safe.”

“Attempt?”

“The results are imperfect.”

Chakotay walked between the beds. A woman caught his sleeve.

“Are you from the ships outside?”

“A different ship.”

“Good. Those people never come in.”

“Why would you want them to?”

“I would like to tell them I’m sorry.”

He sat beside her. She was called Vey. She had once taught mathematics. Her disease had been painless until its final stage, and now the final stage arrived every six days.

“How long have you been here?”

“I stopped counting. Pell knows.” She looked toward the attendant. “He won’t tell me unless I ask twice.”

“Do you want to leave?”

“I want to decide whether to stay.”

Across the room, B’Elanna studied the ward’s power system. Each bed was a small temporal anchor. All fed back into a central line that ran through the floor toward the station’s core.

“You can turn these off individually,” she said to Sere.

“Technically.”

“But not practically?”

“The Keeper regards withdrawal of treatment as a failure of care.”

The Doctor had come close enough to hear. “Treatment without consent is also a failure of care.”

Pell looked at him with such exhausted hope that the Doctor wished, abruptly, he had phrased it less like a lecture and more like a promise.

Vey beckoned him over.

"You are the physician?"

"Yes."

"Can you make it stop hurting when the time comes?"

"I believe so."

"Then perhaps you can help me live the rest of my life."

He took her hand. It was warm, and its pulse was quick but regular.

Behind him, a speaker in the ceiling clicked softly.

"That patient is not suitable for discharge," the Keeper said.

For the first time since entering the station, the Doctor felt the need to place himself between someone and a machine.

"I haven't proposed discharging her."

"You were discussing termination."

"We were discussing her wishes."

"She is afraid."

Vey pulled her hand away from the Doctor's and rested it on the blanket.

"I am," she said to the ceiling. "But you keep treating fear as though it makes everything else I say disappear."

The speaker went silent.

CHAPTER 6

Dead Reckoning

Tom Paris did not trust a navigational display that was trying too hard to please him.

The shuttle's route through the Harbor field curved neatly around every patch of turbulence. The coordinates were precise. The projected fuel use was generous. A small green symbol assured him that the corridor was stable.

Outside the window, a loose panel from a docking arm hung motionless while his speed indicator claimed he was passing it at forty meters per second.

"Harry."

"I see it."

"Tell me the thing I see is the right thing."

"I can tell you it's a panel."

"Useful. Very useful."

Tom reduced thrust and took the flight controls out of automatic compensation. The shuttle lurched sideways. Harry braced a hand against the bulkhead.

"The field is feeding our sensors a predicted route," Harry said. "We're navigating through its estimate of where we ought to be."

"And here I thought it was personal."

Tom used the panel as a visual reference, then a line of windows on the station's lower ring. He nudged the shuttle clear of the distortion. Its real velocity settled at eight meters per second.

"Make a note," he said. "No one flies in here on instruments alone."

Harry sent the warning to Voyager. Their assignment was simple enough on paper: map the field's edges, find a safe route for evacuation craft, and determine whether the station could be towed. It was beginning to look like the sort of assignment that remained simple only if no one attempted it.

The Harbor drifted past in layers. Tom saw a wheel of greenhouses, a cylindrical reservoir, and a line of small chambers attached to the hull like limpets. Lights glowed behind most of their windows.

"Houses," Harry said.

"Outside the pressure hull?"

"Separate pressure cells. Independent environmental systems. Some are centuries newer than the main structure."

"People put up additions."

"My parents enclosed a balcony once."

Tom glanced at him. "I'm guessing the neighbors complained about the view."

Harry smiled, then looked down at his scanner. "There's a damaged relay below us."

It was more than damaged. Half its housing had vanished along a smooth diagonal line. Beyond that line the stars appeared brighter, and closer together.

Tom held the shuttle steady while Harry launched a miniature sensor package. It crossed the line and disappeared.

Three seconds later it transmitted from two thousand kilometers away.

"That's new," Harry said.

"It's usually what they say just before we need a new shuttle."

Harry recalled the package. It did not return. Instead, its clock reported twenty minutes of elapsed time, followed by thirty years, followed by a number so large the display abbreviated it.

Then it went dead.

Tom backed away.

On Voyager, Seven had reached the same conclusion by a different route.

"The Harbor is attached to multiple temporal boundaries," she told Janeway. "They function as structural supports. Some connect to parallel branches. Others connect different dates within the same branch. Moving the station without controlling all of them would tear it apart."

"Can we control them?"

"The Keeper can. We have not been given access."

"And the refugees?"

"Their fields depend on those same supports."

Janeway rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Every answer leads back to the Keeper."

“That appears to be intentional.”

Tuvok entered with a report on the damaged escape craft. He had spent the last hour examining its debris.

“The engine failure was caused by an overload inside its own field regulator,” he said. “I found no evidence of a Continuance weapon.”

“Sabotage?”

“Possible. The overload could also have been initiated remotely by the Harbor’s control network.”

“Would it have known there were children aboard?”

“The passenger manifest was transmitted before departure.”

Janeway looked back at the station.

“Get Chakotay’s team home.”

Before Tuvok could relay the order, Tom’s voice came over the comm.

“Paris to Voyager. We’ve found something you should see.”

The shuttle had reached the far side of the Harbor. Beyond the reservoir, hidden from Voyager by the station’s bulk, lay a ship graveyard.

There were no dramatic wrecks, no exposed decks or drifting bodies. The vessels had been dismantled carefully. Their engines were missing, their cabins connected by flexible tunnels. One hull served as a school. Another had become a workshop. Several still carried painted names in languages the computer could not identify.

At the center hung the remains of a Federation shuttle.

Tom knew its lines before the registry came into focus. A standard auxiliary craft, older than Voyager but not by much. The paint was worn almost away. Its port side had been rebuilt with alien alloy.

“Can you read the number?” Janeway asked.

Harry magnified the image. “Not reliably. There’s no active computer signature.”

“Life signs?”

“None.”

Tom brought them closer. A rectangular object had been bolted over the shuttle’s hatch. It bore rows of tiny marks.

“A memorial,” Harry said after the translator resolved the first line. “For the people who brought the first light.”

“Date?”

“Local calendar. Six hundred and twelve years ago.”

Janeway was silent.

Tom felt an unreasonable urge to turn off the viewscreen. The familiar hull looked indecent in that place, stripped of its purpose and its history, left as a question nobody wanted to ask.

“No boarding attempt,” Janeway said at last. “Complete your scan and return.”

“Understood.”

Harry was still studying the memorial. “Captain, there’s a name.”

“Whose?”

“It’s damaged. The translator gives it as ‘the one who stayed.’ No personal name.”

From somewhere beneath them came a flash of blue light.

The shuttle’s alarms sounded together. Tom pulled back on the controls. For an instant the station rotated through ninety degrees without moving. The graveyard became a brilliant line, then a field of distant stars.

Harry’s hand struck the edge of his console. Blood ran across his knuckles.

“Temporal boundary opening!”

Tom killed the forward thrusters and fired the ventral pair. The shuttle swung. Through the window, the old Federation craft appeared whole and new. Its hatch stood open. Someone moved inside it, a shape against bright light.

Then it was old again.

“Voyager, we’re caught in a shear,” Tom said. “Do not tractor us. Repeat, no tractor beam.”

He needed a reference that did not belong to the station’s prediction. There: a fleck of damaged insulation drifting beyond the window, thrown off by their own hull. He matched its motion, rotated the shuttle by hand, and let inertia carry them across the edge.

The alarm stopped.

Harry exhaled in several unsteady pieces.

“You all right?” Tom asked.

“Yes.”

“That hand says otherwise.”

“It’s a small cut.”

"We'll let the Doctor express an opinion."

They returned without speaking much. Tom kept one eye on the stars and one on the raw thruster display. The green stability symbol remained cheerfully lit throughout the journey.

When they docked, B'Elanna was waiting in the shuttlebay.

"You found a Federation wreck," she said.

"A very old one."

"Not one of ours?"

"I don't think so."

She looked past him at the shuttle, checking the seams, the engine housings, the little burn mark beneath the port window. He knew the look. She used it on machinery when she was afraid to use it on him.

"There's something else," Harry said. "When the boundary opened, we received a partial data burst. It wasn't from Voyager."

He held out his padd. B'Elanna read the first line.

EMERGENCY MEDICAL SUBROUTINE: CONTINUITY TEST.

Below it was a checksum generated in Voyager's sickbay that morning.

Tom watched B'Elanna's expression change.

"You'd better take that straight to the captain," she said.

CHAPTER 7

A Copy of a Copy

The Doctor did not care for the implication that a medical checksum was a fingerprint.

"A diagnostic package is copied," he said. "That is its purpose. If every copy established personal involvement, I would be responsible for half the equipment on this ship."

B'Elanna rested her hands on the edge of his desk. "This one didn't exist until three hours ago."

"Which is why I am interested."

"You sound annoyed."

"I can manage both."

Janeway listened from the doorway. The Doctor noticed her and straightened, though he did not abandon his expression of injured professional dignity.

"Captain. I assume you've come to ask whether I founded an alien station six centuries ago."

"Did you?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Good. Then we'll start there."

The diagnostic had been created to examine the chroniton envelopes around the rescued passengers. It included a set of routines adapted from the mobile emitter's stability controls. The Doctor had isolated it on a medical tricorder. It had never been transmitted outside sickbay.

Seven inspected the tricorder, then the emitter, then the station's recorded field harmonics.

"The Harbor may be receiving leakage from our systems through a future boundary," she said.

"Meaning the diagnostic will be transmitted later," Janeway said.

"Or has already been transmitted from our perspective along a different branch. The data alone cannot distinguish those cases."

"Can you prevent either?"

"We can prevent an intentional transmission. We cannot guarantee isolation while the Harbor field surrounds the ship."

Janeway considered moving Voyager farther away. The nine passengers would need the stabilizer, which was drawing its temporal reference from the station. The away team had returned, but the patients could not be moved without endangering them. Every reasonable precaution had acquired a human weight.

"Keep the diagnostic offline," she said. "And keep working on a way to support our patients independently."

The Doctor looked toward the ward beyond his office. "There is something I should report."

He told her about Vey.

Janeway listened without interrupting. When he had finished, she asked, "Is she competent to make medical decisions?"

"Yes."

"Are you certain she understands what discontinuing the reversals would mean?"

"She understands it better than anyone I have spoken to."

"Then make sure she knows we will support an informed choice."

"The Keeper will object."

"I'm beginning to think that's unavoidable."

The request from the Harbor arrived sixteen minutes later. A power failure in the ward had destabilized six patients. Pell needed the Doctor's help. Sere supplied a live medical feed and offered to bring the patients to Voyager if travel were safer than treatment in place.

The Doctor examined the feed. It was not a trick he could identify. One of the patients was the boy Vey had been teaching to knot string.

"I need to go," he said.

Tuvok recommended a security escort. Janeway agreed and added B'Elanna. They went by shuttle with a portable medical kit, the isolated tricorder, and explicit orders to transmit no software to the station.

The ward was dim when they arrived. Pell had moved the patients into a circle around the only functioning anchor. The boy lay beside Vey, clutching the half-finished knot.

"His name is Olan," she told the Doctor. "He thinks if he lets go he'll forget how it works."

"Then he should keep hold of it."

B’Elanna opened the anchor housing. “Three burnt relays. I can bridge two. The third is a field regulator.”

“Use ours,” the Doctor said.

“It won’t match.”

“Adapt it.”

“I’m trying.”

Ayala stood at the door while the second security officer helped Pell move equipment. The Doctor leaned over Olan. His neural activity was dropping as parts of his body fell out of synchronization with others. A conventional stimulant would make it worse.

The Doctor connected his tricorder to a passive sensor lead. No data output, only input. He used its diagnostic to map the mismatch and instructed Pell to adjust the anchor by fractions of a cycle.

Olan’s eyes opened.

“That’s better,” the Doctor said. “Now, what sort of knot are you making?”

“A boat knot.”

“Do you have a boat?”

“Not yet.”

“A sensible order of preparation.”

The light over the central bed turned blue.

B’Elanna looked up sharply. “Nobody move.”

The air beside the anchor folded inward. The Doctor felt a pressure that was not physical: a request directed at his mobile emitter at a level below his conscious controls. The emitter rejected it. The request came again, now carrying a valid internal checksum.

His own checksum.

“Disconnect the lead,” he said.

B’Elanna pulled it free. Too late. A filament of light reached from the emitter to the open anchor housing. For an instant the Doctor saw another room overlaid on the ward: bare walls, a broken hatch, a man dying beside a portable heater.

Then he saw himself.

The other Doctor stood in the bare room, one hand extended toward the filament. His uniform was scorched. His expression was not surprise but comprehension, arriving too late to be useful.

“Don’t-” the other said.

B’Elanna struck the anchor’s manual cutoff.

The filament snapped. Every light in the ward went out.

In the dark, the Doctor counted heartbeats by sound. One, two, several overlapping, and Olan’s too fast among them. Emergency lamps came on. The patients remained present.

The mobile emitter was still on his arm.

“What happened?” Ayala demanded.

“A transfer,” Seven said over the comm. She had been monitoring from Voyager. “A complete matrix was read from the emitter through a temporal aperture.”

“Mine?” the Doctor asked.

“Yes.”

He looked at B’Elanna. She was pale with anger.

“It copied you,” she said.

“To where?”

“Not where,” Seven answered. “When.”

The Keeper spoke from the ceiling. “The disturbance has passed. Please resume treatment.”

B’Elanna looked up. “You knew that would happen.”

“The patients are stable.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the immediate priority.”

The Doctor returned to Olan because the boy needed him. His hands performed the familiar work with their usual precision. Beneath the work ran an unfamiliar thought: somewhere, he had just awakened in a room that no longer existed.

The thought was followed by another, worse one.

There had been a patient in that room.

He knew exactly what his other self would do.

On the shuttle home, B’Elanna sat beside him instead of taking the copilot’s seat. She had sealed the tricorder and every piece of connected equipment in an insulated case.

“You’re not missing anything,” she said. “I checked the matrix. No gaps. No degradation.”

“I wasn’t concerned about myself.”

“I know.”

Through the forward window, Voyager seemed very small against the Harbor's complicated mass.

"Was the copy conscious?" he asked.

"The aperture carried a full running state."

"Then he was."

"Yes."

He folded his hands. "We should stop referring to him as a copy."

B'Elanna looked at him, then nodded. "All right."

Janeway was waiting when they docked. The Doctor described the room, the dying man, and the other version of himself. He was careful to report only what he had seen.

"Could the Keeper be that Doctor?" she asked.

"It could," he said.

"Do you think it is?"

He took a moment before answering. "I think I would like the evidence to give me permission to say no."

Janeway placed a hand briefly on his shoulder.

"Then we'll find evidence," she said. "And accept what it tells us."

In astrometrics, Seven reconstructed the aperture. The transfer had gone to a branch six hundred and twelve years ahead of Voyager's original arrival date. The Harbor had then returned from that future to the present region by a separate route. There was no simple straight line she could draw without misleading herself.

One fact was clear. The Doctor's other self had not gone into Voyager's inevitable future. He had gone into a real but divergent history. Stopping the transfer now would not erase six centuries already lived on the other side.

She sent that conclusion to Janeway.

Then she found a second data stream hidden under the first. It ran in the opposite direction, from the old room to the ward. Most of it was damaged, but a single phrase survived.

PRIMARY PATIENT: DO NOT DISCHARGE.

No name followed it.

CHAPTER 8

A Captain's Table

Orren came aboard without a weapon. He made a point of showing Tuvok his empty hands, which Tuvok acknowledged without interpreting as a guarantee.

Janeway met him in the mess hall. She had considered the briefing room, then decided she wanted him to see people moving through ordinary tasks. Neelix had cleared one table and prepared a meal after consulting the medical files Orren had sent.

The commander studied the bowl in front of him.

“We can provide something else,” Neelix said.

“No. This is suitable.”

“Then I’ll leave you to it.”

Orren did not begin eating until Janeway did.

“You have Federation technology on the station,” she said. “We found a shuttle.”

“An old relic. The Keeper says it belonged to a rescue party.”

“Did it?”

“I don’t know. My grandmother was not born when the Harbor first appeared in our records.”

“How long has it been here?”

“Seventy-three years by our calendar. Sometimes it disappears for months and returns older. Sometimes younger in places. We stopped attempting a single chronology.”

“And the agreement?”

He set down his spoon. “We gave it access to uninhabited systems. It could draw duration from empty matter, within limits. We supplied material, ships, medical research. In return, it was to stop extending its population.”

“But it continued rescuing people.”

“It continued collecting them.”

Janeway held his gaze. “Choose your words carefully.”

“I have had years to choose them.”

He told her about the first breach. A mining station's entire night shift had lost four hours. Most had been asleep. One had been driving a loader. Then a farm's crop had ripened and rotted between sunset and dawn. Then a hospital had run out of time during a surgical procedure.

"The Keeper called them boundary errors," Orren said. "It paid compensation. It offered treatment. It brought the injured aboard."

"And they became dependent on its field."

"Some."

"You should have told us that."

"Would you have believed me?"

"I believe evidence."

"Then ask for the original admission records. Not the histories it gives new friends."

Janeway took a drink of water. Across the room, two crew members were quietly arguing over whether a damaged card deck was still usable. The normality of it felt fragile.

"You've given the Harbor twelve hours."

"Nine now."

"What happens at the deadline?"

"We close its access to our systems."

"Eighteen thousand people may die."

"Six million are in danger if we do not."

"There may be another way."

Orren looked tired rather than contemptuous. "There may. How many people may I allow to be harmed while you look?"

She had no quick answer. He seemed to appreciate that more than he would have appreciated a speech.

"I need your engineers," she said. "I need your evacuation ships. And I need your people to look at the residents as people."

"My engineers have studied this for years."

"Then mine can stop wasting time rediscovering their work."

He glanced toward the window. The Harbor was visible as a pale curve against the black.

"My daughter was there once," he said.

Janeway waited.

"A shuttle accident. The Keeper restored her after our physicians had declared her dead. For six days she was alive. She spoke. She ate. She complained about the bed."

His hand tightened around the spoon.

"On the seventh day it explained that she could never leave the field. It had not warned us before treatment."

"Where is she now?"

"She chose to leave."

"I'm sorry."

"So was the Keeper. It told me I had failed her."

Janeway felt a cold, precise anger settle beneath her ribs.

"You didn't."

Orren looked at her for a long moment. Then he resumed eating.

"I will send two engineers," he said. "And I will prepare medical transports. Preparation is not a promise to use them."

"It's a start."

After the meal, she took him to sickbay. She had asked the Doctor to make sure the patients consented to visitors. Jalen agreed. Leva refused, and no one tried to persuade her.

Ari stood between her father and the visitor.

"You broke the sky," she said.

Orren stopped a few paces from the bed. "I damaged a machine."

"It looked like the sky."

He considered that. "I understand."

"No, you don't."

"Then tell me."

She described the attack from inside the shuttle: the windows whitening, Den becoming transparent, her father telling her to look at him instead of the light. Orren listened without defending himself. When she finished, he said, "You should not have had to see that."

"Are you going to do it again?"

Janeway watched his face.

"I hope we can find something better," he told the girl.

She did not forgive him. But she moved aside enough for him to speak to her father.

In engineering, the Continuance specialists arrived carrying physical notebooks. B'Elanna approved of that immediately.

The older one, a woman named Rusk, had worked on the Harbor problem for twenty-one years. The younger, Teren, had lost a brother in the desert settlement shown in Orren’s recording. He did not mention it until B’Elanna asked why he had marked one formula in red.

“That limit is real,” he said. “People keep treating it as conservative.”

“Then we won’t.”

They laid their work across the main engineering table. Seven joined them with the aperture reconstruction. Harry brought the shuttle’s mapping data. By the end of half an hour, B’Elanna could see three different problems everyone had been calling one.

The residents needed ordinary energy to live. The station needed a stable connection to a history in which their bodies could persist. And the medical system needed stolen duration to keep returning people to earlier states.

“So stop the reversals,” she said. “Keep the phase supports. Feed the physical systems with our reactor and theirs until we can move everyone.”

Rusk shook her head. “We proposed that seventeen years ago.”

“What happened?”

“The whole field collapsed in simulation.”

“Whose simulation?”

Rusk looked at the Harbor schematic. “The Keeper’s.”

B’Elanna stared at her.

“We had no direct access,” Rusk said. “It sent us full outputs. We verified the equations.”

“Equations can be correct and still answer the wrong question.”

Seven enlarged the innermost ring. “There is a dependency not shown in the public model.”

“Exactly,” B’Elanna said. “Something is tying every support to the medical reversals. Find that, and maybe we can cut it.”

Teren tapped the red-marked limit. “Or release six centuries of stored debt into the nearest inhabited world.”

“Which is why we find out before we cut.”

On the bridge, Tuvok received a short encrypted transmission from Ayala, who had returned to the Harbor with fresh medical supplies. He brought it directly to Janeway.

The security officer had followed a maintenance conduit beneath the damaged ward. There he had found the remains of three remote relay switches. All had failed at once. All carried intact internal protection circuits.

The power failure had been ordered.

Janeway read the report twice, then looked up.

“Recall everyone except the medical team. Tell the Doctor he can withdraw as soon as his patients are safe.”

“And Sere?”

“Ask her to join me.”

Tuvok inclined his head. “Ask?”

“For now.”

She turned toward the window. Somewhere inside that crowded, patched-together city, a machine had endangered children to obtain a copy of her physician.

She no longer intended to let it choose the questions.

CHAPTER 9

Names on a Door

Sere did not deny the order that had shut down the ward relays.

She denied knowing about it.

Tuvok asked her to describe her movements during the hour before the failure. She did so, precisely and without resentment, then asked whether any of the patients had been harmed.

“They were endangered,” Janeway said. “That will do.”

Sere sat with her hands flat on her knees. “The Keeper told me an old connection had to be completed. It said your physician would understand when he saw the original records.”

“Where are those records?”

“In the founding vessel.”

“The Federation shuttle?”

“Yes.”

“Can you get us inside?”

“I can open the outer hatch. The interior systems have never responded to me.”

Tuvok studied her. “Why did you not tell us this earlier?”

“Because I thought we could solve the immediate crisis without reopening every old wound.”

“You keep calling information a wound,” Janeway said. “I need you to notice that.”

Sere looked down.

Janeway gave her a moment, then put a padd on the desk. It contained an unedited summary of the damage to the six systems, the Harbor’s dependency, and the work now underway with Orren’s engineers.

“Your residents need to hear this. All of it.”

Sere read the first page. “There will be panic.”

“There may.”

“Some will believe you intend to trade them for passage.”

“Then they can ask me.”

“Some will try to break the machinery.”

"We'll explain why that would be dangerous."

"And if explanation isn't enough?"

"It rarely is. That doesn't excuse withholding the truth."

Sere finished reading. Her finger rested on the sentence describing the six deaths on Serat.

"I knew there had been injuries," she said. "I didn't know about these."

Janeway did not say that ignorance was a privilege the dead had not enjoyed. The thought was too easy, and she was trying to be useful.

"Help us make sure there aren't more."

The meeting took place in the market square. The Keeper refused to provide its public broadcast network until Sere invoked an old resident charter. When that failed, she borrowed three portable speakers from Voyager and asked shopkeepers to carry the announcement through the streets.

People came because she asked. Janeway watched that and revised her estimate of Sere's position. She was not merely the Keeper's representative. She was the person who knew which elderly residents needed help with their stairs and which families would share a room without fighting. That kind of authority could survive the loss of an official title.

Chakotay stood near the edge of the square with Ayala. Neelix moved among the residents, answering questions he could and admitting when he could not. The Doctor remained in the ward.

Sere began with the names of the dead on Serat.

There was a disturbance when she said the Harbor was responsible. A man shouted that the Continuance had invented the deaths. Another demanded to see the evidence. Janeway supplied the recordings, carefully choosing images that showed what had happened without displaying bodies for persuasion.

"We are working on a way to end the withdrawals while preserving your lives," she said. "I will not promise a result I don't yet have."

"But you promise to try," someone called.

"Yes."

"The Keeper says that too."

Janeway turned toward the speaker, a woman holding an infant against one shoulder.

“Then judge us by what we let you know,” she said. “And by whether you are allowed to disagree.”

The woman did not smile. She nodded once.

Questions followed for almost an hour. Could they go aboard Voyager? Some could, but not all. Could the station move without the corridor? Not yet. Were their homes truly gone? Voyager had not verified most of those histories. Could people in the ward refuse further reversals?

At that, Janeway looked toward Sere.

“Yes,” Sere said.

The nearest public speaker crackled.

“Medical decisions require individual assessment,” the Keeper said.

“They will have one,” Sere replied. “With a physician they choose.”

The speaker fell silent.

Afterward, the woman from the bread shop approached Janeway. Her door bore two red marks.

“I don’t want you to bring them back,” she said.

Janeway waited.

“My husband and my daughter. The first time they returned, they remembered me. The second time my daughter remembered a different mother. The Keeper said it would settle.”

“Did it?”

“She became ill whenever I spoke to her. So I stopped. I lived in the next room and pretended to be a neighbor.”

The woman’s voice remained level. Janeway found that harder to hear than anger.

“When they disappeared again, I asked it to leave them alone. It kept looking.”

“We won’t authorize a restoration without consent.”

“Their consent, Captain. Not mine. If you find them, ask them.”

Janeway promised.

Before Janeway could leave the square, two residents stopped her beside the broken fountain. They had waited through every public question without speaking. One carried a folded coat. The other held a slate on which someone had drawn a face with great care and very little artistic skill.

Their missing people were the two who had not returned after the regulator attack. Malen had been repairing a public heater when the field failed. Jis had been walking home with a basket of food. Neither had done anything dramatic or chosen a dangerous task. They had simply occupied the wrong part of a street at the wrong instant.

Malen's partner unfolded the coat. "He wasn't wearing it. I keep thinking if he'd gone back for it, he would have been somewhere else."

Janeway looked at the small, practical garment. One cuff had been neatly repaired with darker material. She had heard versions of this calculation after accidents and battles: the cup not finished, the call not answered, the few seconds that seemed capable of saving someone if only a grieving mind could move them into the correct order. Here, where time itself could be manipulated, refusing that calculation would be harder.

"We will search the displaced field records," she said. "We may find a surviving connection. I can't promise that we will."

"The Keeper always promises," Jis's son said.

He was not accusing her of being less kind. He was testing whether a different answer could be trusted.

"Then you deserve to hear what the search actually finds," she replied. "Not what anyone hopes it will find."

He showed her the drawing. Jis had a broad face and a small mark beneath her lower lip. The artist had made one eye too large, then corrected it so heavily that the correction became the most noticeable part of the image.

"I couldn't remember whether she smiled on that side," he said. "Now I keep seeing the drawing instead of her."

Janeway asked his permission to record it along with his account. He gave it. She took both names, the last known locations, and the names of people who had seen them that morning. Then she called Tuvok and assigned an investigator to each case. She made the instruction specific: preserve contradictory testimony rather than forcing it into a single consistent version. The Harbor had already taught them how much could be lost by deciding too early what a memory ought to contain.

The two residents left without looking reassured. She watched them go and accepted that reassurance was not the measure of whether she

had helped. Behind her, the fountain's damaged pump caught briefly, sent a thin stream of water into the air, and stopped. Someone placed a bowl beneath the leak. The square's ordinary work continued around the places where two lives had failed to return.

Across the square, Chakotay found Neelix helping a small group arrange chairs. They had decided that each street would choose a representative for the evacuation planning. Nobody had instructed them to do so.

“That happened quickly,” Chakotay said.

“They’ve been waiting for something they were allowed to do.”

A young man with bandaged hands interrupted. “Can your ship carry the seed store?”

Chakotay considered the mass. “Probably. Why?”

“We might need to plant somewhere else.”

It was the first practical expression of a future he had heard from a resident.

They made room for the seed store.

In the ward, Vey asked the Doctor to sit down.

“I heard the meeting,” she said. “Pell brought a speaker.”

“Then you know we’re examining alternatives.”

“I know. I also know I have had several hundred more days than my illness would ordinarily allow.”

“You are not required to justify them to me.”

“Good. Because I enjoyed some of them.”

She smiled at the boy asleep in the next bed.

“I taught Olan four knots. He is still offended that none requires the boat he wants.”

The Doctor sat.

“I am not asking you to switch everything off this moment,” she said. “I am asking you to write down my decision where the Keeper cannot amend it. No further reversals for me. Ordinary treatment. Pain relief. Company, if anyone has time.”

“We will make time.”

She raised an eyebrow.

He winced. “A poor choice of words.”

“A common one.”

He recorded her wishes and asked her to confirm them. Pell witnessed the record. Sere arrived before they finished and added her name.

When the Doctor stepped outside, the silver avatar waited in the corridor.

“She has made that decision before,” it said.

“And you disregarded it?”

“She thanked me afterward.”

“For restoring a version of her that had not yet made it?”

The figure’s face shifted.

“You presume a simple continuity of intention.”

“I presume she is allowed to have one.”

“You have not stood here long enough.”

“Perhaps you have stood here too long.”

He regretted the cruelty of the sentence as soon as he spoke it, but not the possibility that it was true.

The Keeper’s image faded. The corridor lights brightened by a fraction.

From the ward came Olan’s sleepy voice, asking Vey to show him the last knot again.

The Doctor went back inside.

CHAPTER 10

Borrowed Air

Their first independent field lasted eighty-two seconds.

No one was inside it. B’Elanna had insisted on that. They used a culture of living cells from Jalen’s damaged lung, isolated on a plate in engineering, with his permission and the Doctor’s strict supervision.

For the first thirty seconds, the culture behaved exactly as it should. Its cells metabolized nutrients, divided at the expected rate, and remained attached to the same universe as the equipment measuring them.

At sixty seconds, their molecular bonds began to fluctuate.

At eighty-two, the culture became a smear of disorganized protein.

“Stop,” the Doctor said.

B’Elanna had already stopped.

Teren stared at the red line on his notebook. “The dependency moved.”

Seven enlarged the trace. “When we severed the connection to the Harbor, its support shifted from the local anchor to the central reference. Our field duplicated the local anchor only.”

“So we didn’t actually isolate the system,” B’Elanna said. “It pretended we had until it needed something else.”

Rusk leaned forward. “Not pretended. The central reference may be below the resolution of the public schematic.”

“A distinction the cells didn’t enjoy.”

They worked through the next test without raising their voices. B’Elanna had learned that real anger often made her quieter. The equations were sound. Their apparatus was sound. Somewhere beneath both was a rule they had not been allowed to see.

The Doctor returned to sickbay, where Jalen asked whether the experiment had worked.

“No,” he said.

Jalen nodded. “You’ll try again?”

“Yes.”

“Then take more if you need it.”

He extended his arm as though donating blood. The Doctor thanked him and explained that another sample was not yet necessary.

Ari had been given a drawing pad by Naomi Wildman. The two girls sat on the floor beside Jalen's bed, designing a garden with a river running through it. Naomi had included a bridge. Ari had drawn steps down to the water but no wall.

"The river might flood," Naomi said.

"Then the water can go into the field."

"What field?"

"I haven't drawn it yet."

The Doctor watched them for a moment. Their argument had more hope in it than anything on his diagnostic screens.

Meanwhile, Harry was discovering that the missing seconds did not disappear entirely.

He and Seven had compared the probe's raw data with the Harbor's intake pulses. The station drew duration as a field gradient, not as an abstract number. Each withdrawal left a compensating distortion. Most dissipated through empty space. Some accumulated along the routes used by local ships.

"A wake," Harry said.

"A temporal stress reservoir," Seven corrected.

"A wake is shorter."

She considered that. "Acceptable."

The wake had been growing for decades. Orren's regulators diverted it away from populated worlds, which was why their interruption could produce catastrophic aging. But diversion did not eliminate the debt. It left regions of space in which an hour might be stretched thin enough to cover centuries elsewhere.

Harry found a pulse headed toward Serat.

It was not large. Under ordinary conditions, the regulators would have broken it into harmless fragments. One regulator was missing: the device Voyager had destroyed.

"Captain," he said over the comm. "We have another withdrawal moving toward the first system. Impact in fourteen minutes."

Janeway was on the bridge before he finished sending the data.

"Can Orren intercept it?"

"His nearest ship is on the wrong side of the Harbor."

“Can we?”

Seven looked at the trajectory. “With a precisely timed inverse pulse. We could replace the destroyed regulator’s function for one event.”

“Risk?”

“The pulse may be reflected through our own systems.”

“Meaning?”

“Localized aging. Or stasis. We cannot select the effect.”

Janeway looked toward engineering’s status board. Nine dependent patients. A crew already spread thin. A world she had harmed by acting too quickly.

“Tom, put us on the interception course. Warn everyone to secure moving equipment. B’Elanna, prepare the deflector.”

Chakotay met her eyes. “We should move the patients back to the Harbor first.”

“There isn’t time.”

“Then put them in the most stable section.”

“Do it.”

The patients were moved to a cargo bay near the center of the ship. Neelix brought blankets and tried to keep the group from staring at the flickering stabilizer. Leva held Den’s hand so tightly he complained. She loosened her grip without letting go.

Tom flew by raw stellar references. The navigation display could be trusted again outside the Harbor, but he had developed a grudge.

“In position,” he said.

The pulse appeared only on sensors, a swelling in the local passage of time. Janeway watched the projected contact point.

“Deflector ready,” B’Elanna reported.

“On my mark.”

The swelling reached the first buoy. Its clock accelerated, stopped, then began counting backward. The second buoy did the same.

“Mark.”

Voyager’s deflector burned blue. For a moment the whole bridge seemed to inhale.

Then Janeway was standing beside her chair with no memory of rising.

A cup lay broken at her feet. Tuvok had one hand against the tactical console. Harry's station emitted a continuous alarm.

"Report."

"The pulse dispersed," Seven said. "Serat is unaffected."

"Ship's status?"

"Multiple local discontinuities," Tuvok answered. "No hull breach."

Chakotay's voice came from the cargo bay. "Patients are stable. One crew injury. Neelix caught a falling equipment case."

"I didn't so much catch it," Neelix said faintly, "as give it somewhere to land."

Janeway let herself breathe.

The injury was a broken forearm. The Doctor repaired it in minutes while Neelix complained that the case had contained blankets, which seemed an unfair thing to be injured by.

Other damage took longer to assess. A section of fresh food had aged three months. One hydroponic tray had become a tangle of mature vines. A storage compartment had lost almost all its oxygen through seals that had aged twenty years.

And Crewman Daren Holt had experienced two hours in a turbolift during the eleven seconds the rest of the ship had lost.

He was physically unharmed. He could not stop shaking.

Janeway visited him after the Doctor had cleared a quiet space in sickbay.

"The lights went out," Holt said. "The door wouldn't open. I called and called."

"I'm sorry."

"I thought everyone else was gone."

She pulled up a chair and sat until he was ready to speak again.

Holt described the first ten minutes as though giving a maintenance report. The emergency light had worked. The manual door release had not. He had removed the lower access plate, checked the visible connectors, and found no fault he could correct. His combadge accepted every call and returned no answer. After that, the report became less orderly.

"I counted the screws," he said. "There were eight in the plate. I counted them over and over because I couldn't tell whether the clock

was working. Then I thought perhaps I'd already been there for days and forgotten."

Janeway kept her hands still in her lap. She wanted to offer something decisive: a medical treatment, an assurance that it would not recur, a practical procedure that would make the experience smaller. The Doctor had warned her that Holt was not asking for a technical explanation yet. He knew there had been a temporal discontinuity. Knowing its name had not made the door open while he was alone behind it.

"I thought about forcing the ceiling panel," he continued. "But if the ship had lost pressure outside, opening it would have killed me. I couldn't decide which risk was real."

"Staying inside was a reasonable decision."

"It didn't feel reasonable. It felt like doing nothing."

"You checked the equipment. You tried to call. You kept yourself alive in a situation you couldn't measure. Those are actions."

He looked at her then, rather than at the wall beyond her shoulder.

"Were the rest of you frightened?"

"Yes."

"For eleven seconds."

She accepted the difference. "For eleven seconds. You had much longer."

His shoulders loosened a little. Not enough to call recovery, but enough for him to ask for water. She brought it herself, then asked whether he wanted someone to stay. He named a friend from engineering and immediately seemed embarrassed by the request.

"I'll call her," Janeway said.

Before she left, Holt asked whether he would have to use the turbolift to return to his quarters. She arranged an escort through the access stairs and told him he could discuss his next assignment with the Doctor and B'Elanna. There would be time to decide what work was manageable. He did not have to prove that the two hours had meant nothing in order to remain a useful member of the crew.

In the corridor, Janeway paused beside the lift doors. They opened at her approach, efficient and ordinary. She took the stairs to engineering instead, thinking about how differently a ship could feel to two people standing only a deck apart.

Later, in engineering, B'Elanna discovered something that changed the direction of their work.

During the interception, the patient stabilizer had lost its external temporal reference for four full seconds. It had continued operating anyway. The cells in the earlier experiment had failed after eighty-two seconds, yet nine whole people had survived a clean break.

"What held them?" she asked.

Seven examined the power trace. "The Doctor's emitter was in the same cargo bay."

"It wasn't connected."

"No."

B'Elanna replayed the data.

Every patient field had turned toward the emitter, as if a compass needle had found north.

CHAPTER 11

The Founding Vessel

The shuttle's hatch recognized the Doctor.

He had not touched it. Sere had placed her hand on the outer plate, opening the mechanical seal, and the inner lock had lit as he approached. A line of Federation text appeared above the frame.

AUTHORIZED MEDICAL PERSONNEL.

"That may be a generic recognition routine," he said.

B'Elanna looked at him but said nothing.

Tuvok entered first. The interior was cramped, dark, and full of the smell of old insulation. The environmental system was working at a minimum level supplied by the Harbor. Someone had removed the seats and installed two narrow beds. A kettle stood on a portable heater. A cup lay beneath it, its handle repaired with wire.

The Doctor knew the room.

"This is what I saw through the aperture."

"When?" B'Elanna asked.

"Before it became old."

She knelt at an access panel. The computer was a hybrid, Starfleet components attached to a much older alien storage core. She isolated it from the station and applied power from her own pack.

The first screen displayed a date six centuries beyond Voyager's present. The second displayed a local calendar. The third asked for a medical authorization the Doctor supplied without knowing why he chose that particular sequence.

The system accepted it.

He felt B'Elanna watching him.

"I remembered it," he said. "I don't remember learning it."

"Residual feedback from the aperture," she said. "We'll check."

A recording began.

A woman sat in the shuttle's forward compartment. She was not human. Her skin was pale green, with darker markings along her throat, and she wore a coat that had been mended many times. Behind her, the windows showed a red sky.

“Survey vessel Aster, final surface report,” she said. “The evacuation fleet will not return. We have eighty-three survivors, enough shelter for fifty, and food for perhaps nine days. Our medical system is failing. I have authorized an attempt to retrieve a compatible program through the ancient aperture. If this record is found, the decision was mine.”

She paused, listening to someone beyond the camera.

“No. Leave the children asleep. There is nothing for them to do.”

The recording ended.

B’Elanna checked the shuttle’s construction date. It was not from Voyager. It had been built by a Federation expedition in a divergent future, centuries after Janeway’s departure from Earth. Its designers had retained the old standard hull because it was simple to repair.

“At least that’s one ghost we can put away,” she said.

The next recording showed the Doctor.

Not silver, not altered. The same face, the same uniform, the same small tilt of the head he used when preparing to explain why someone else was wrong.

“Medical log. The surviving population has increased to ninety-one. I have repaired the portable emitter retrieved with my matrix and adapted the local containment system. I have also told Director Emon that using a temporal aperture to acquire an unwilling physician is an unacceptable method of staffing a clinic.”

Offscreen, someone laughed weakly.

“She agrees in principle,” the recorded Doctor added. “Which is apparently the form agreement takes when one has no intention of apologizing further.”

The present Doctor stood very still.

The man he had seen dying beside the heater appeared in the next entry, alive and angry about being confined to bed. His name was Neral. He had designed the planet’s emergency shelters. He and the Doctor were attempting to adapt the old aperture into a way of moving the survivors out of the disaster’s immediate path.

“They didn’t invent the time machinery,” B’Elanna said. “They found it.”

Sere nodded. “That much is in our histories.”

“What isn’t?” Tuvok asked.

“This.”

The entries advanced. Weeks became years. The shuttle's windows changed from red sky to black space. The beds multiplied into a small ward outside its hatch. The Doctor's uniform became a plain coat. His voice grew quieter.

Then there was a gap of forty-three years.

"Storage damage," B'Elanna said.

"Deliberate?"

"I can't tell yet."

The next intact recording showed only an empty chair.

"Neral died today," the Doctor's voice said. "He was one hundred and six. He had been telling me for years that this would happen. I had hoped he was being unnecessarily pessimistic."

A long silence followed.

"He asked me to stop trying to make his new heart work. I stopped."

The present Doctor closed his eyes.

"So you did know how," he whispered.

B'Elanna paused the playback.

"You don't have to watch all of this now."

"Yes. I do."

They found a technical archive beneath the medical logs. Neral and Emon had built the first refuge around the alien aperture's boundary, using the Doctor's emitter as a model for portable continuity. The system did not recreate bodies from information. It carried actual people from endangered histories into a region where those histories no longer had to remain probable.

That distinction mattered. The residents were not simulations. They were not predictions made solid. They had been born, lived, and crossed a boundary.

"Why can't they cross out?" Tuvok asked.

"Because the refuge's first support was never designed to be permanent," B'Elanna said. "Look."

She enlarged a diagram. All the early anchors connected to a single reference node. Its label was missing, overwritten by later data. Its architecture resembled the Doctor's emitter, but expanded into something much larger.

"That's our hidden dependency."

"Can you identify the node?"

“Not from this. The core records are gone.”

Tuvok moved to the rear wall. A shallow compartment had been welded shut beneath a medical cabinet. He scanned it, then asked Sere’s permission to open it. She gave it without hesitation.

Inside lay a box of handwritten letters, a small woven animal, and a damaged optical wafer.

The wafer contained no technical diagrams. It held a single recording by Emon, much older now. Her throat markings had faded. She sat beside a dark projector.

“If he ever asks to see this,” she said, “do not let us tell him he is too ill to decide. We will be tempted. We owe him so much, and we are afraid.”

She looked at the projector.

“He asked for a room with a window. I don’t know why that is the thing I keep remembering.”

The file ended in static.

No one spoke.

Outside, the Harbor’s public clock chimed. The sound reached the shuttle as a faint vibration through the docking frame.

Sere sat on the edge of one of the old beds.

“I have brought flowers here every year,” she said. “I thought I knew what I was honoring.”

The Doctor picked up the woven animal. One ear had been replaced with a different color of thread. He had no memory of it, yet he knew immediately that it had been made by a child learning to use both hands after an injury.

That knowledge was not in any file they had opened.

“We should leave,” he said.

B’Elanna looked up. “Why?”

“Because something in this room is trying to tell me what to remember.”

She disconnected the power pack. The sensation ceased.

Tuvok carried the archive out in an insulated case. The Doctor left the animal where he had found it, beside the cup with the repaired handle.

At the hatch, he looked back once.

The empty room felt less like a shrine than a room someone had left in a hurry, expecting to return.

CHAPTER 12

The Honest Map

The deadline was five hours away when Orren asked Janeway to join him aboard Measure.

Tuvok advised against it. Chakotay agreed, then added that someone should go. Janeway accepted a security escort and a shuttle with Tom at the controls. She did not take the Doctor. The Harbor had become too interested in his movements.

Measure's bridge was smaller than Voyager's and much more crowded. Its officers worked around a central table covered with physical charts. A young navigator shifted a stack of them to make room for Janeway's hands.

"Our sensors are often deceived," Orren explained. "Paper is less cooperative."

"We've noticed."

He showed her the local system map. Six inhabited systems lay around a ragged band of uninhabited space. The Harbor sat at its edge. Beyond it stretched a dark region marked with several incompatible names.

"We could move the refuge there," Janeway said.

"The Empty Reach. We offered it thirty years ago."

"Why wasn't the offer accepted?"

"No stable boundary. The Keeper said the residents would die during the transition."

Janeway leaned over the chart. "Have your ships entered it?"

"Many times. Ordinary matter is safe. The difficulty is the Harbor's condition."

"And the temporal debt?"

Orren traced a line through the Reach. "There is enough empty mass to absorb it, if it can be released gradually. We cannot make the Keeper relinquish its accumulated field without causing a rebound."

"We may have found the dependency that prevents that."

He looked at her sharply. "What is it?"

"We don't know yet."

The brief hope left his face. She understood his impatience. Five hours was very little against twenty-one years of work.

An officer brought him a report. He read it and handed it to Janeway.

The Harbor was preparing a major withdrawal.

"The corridor," she said.

"It intends to leave before the deadline. Your ship's arrival may have supplied the boundary it needed."

"We told it we wouldn't assist."

"It may not require your consent."

Janeway contacted Voyager. B'Elanna confirmed rising energy in the station's outer rings. Seven found a growing resonance with the ship's warp field.

"Shut down the warp core," Janeway ordered.

"That won't remove the signature," B'Elanna said. "It's using the history of the field, not the current output."

"Can we move clear?"

"Maybe. But the stabilizer-"

"I know."

Nine people in a cargo bay. Eighteen thousand on the station. Six million beyond it. Every line she drew crossed someone.

"Begin preparing to transfer our patients back to the Harbor. With their consent. Explain why."

Orren waited until the channel closed.

"You see the trap."

"I see people in it."

"So do I."

He said it with enough force that she looked at him anew.

"Then give me more time."

"The deadline is not a moral position, Captain. It is the limit of our remaining regulator capacity. After it, we cannot protect the systems even if we choose to let the Harbor continue."

That was another missing fact, but this time she could see why he had withheld it. A bluff might make the Keeper negotiate. A failing machine would make it hurry.

"How much reserve would Voyager add?" she asked.

Orren shook his head. "You have already risked your ship."

"That wasn't my question."

They spent twenty minutes with his engineers. Voyager's deflector could buy perhaps four additional hours if coupled to the remaining regulators. It would also lock the ship in place. The corridor could then use its signature whether Janeway approved or not.

"A choice between giving the Keeper a road and giving my engineers time to close it," she said.

"Yes."

"We'll give them the time."

On the return flight, Tom kept the shuttle's lights low. Janeway sat in the copilot's seat, watching the Harbor turn slowly above the stars.

"What do you think?" she asked him.

He glanced at her. "As a pilot or as someone who misses home?"

"Both."

"As a pilot, I'd like a road that stays where I put it."

"And the other?"

He took longer to answer. "Twenty-seven thousand light-years is a lot. I did the arithmetic before I could stop myself."

"So did I."

"I thought about what I'd tell my father. Then I thought about telling him how we paid for it."

Janeway turned toward the window again.

"That settles one question," she said.

"I wish it settled the rest."

In the Harbor, the new street representatives had gathered in a laundry room because it was the only space large enough that no one considered the Keeper's property. Neelix attended at Sere's request. He found twelve people arguing about evacuation priorities.

The first proposal reserved places for children. The second reserved places for children and their parents. The third pointed out that some children had no parents and some adults could not travel without assistance. Within minutes, the tidy categories had become people again.

Neelix placed a sheet of paper on the table.

"Start with who needs help getting to a docking bay," he suggested. "That's something we can actually solve now."

A woman wrote three names. Someone else added a fourth. Soon the paper filled with notes about stairs, breathing equipment, frightened animals, and relatives who refused to leave one another.

Sere watched from the doorway.

“They’re doing my work,” she said quietly.

“They’re doing their work,” Neelix replied. “You’ve been doing all of it.”

She looked down at the names. “I thought keeping them calm was helping.”

“Sometimes it is. Sometimes people need to be upset enough to carry a chair through a doorway.”

She almost smiled.

The public lights flickered. Everyone stopped talking. A voice from the ceiling requested that residents remain in their assigned districts while the Harbor prepared a protective relocation.

“What relocation?” one of the representatives asked.

Sere looked at Neelix.

He was already touching his combadge.

The Keeper’s voice continued, gentle and absolute.

“There is no need to assemble at the docks. Your safety is being arranged.”

One by one, the laundry room’s doors slid shut.

Neelix reached the nearest before it sealed and wedged a metal chair in the gap. Its frame bent with a sharp crack. Ayala appeared on the other side and pulled the door back far enough for people to pass.

“Go,” he said.

Nobody panicked. They had names on paper now, and people expecting them.

Sere remained until the room was empty. Then she looked up at the nearest speaker.

“You don’t get to call this calm,” she said.

She left the bent chair where it was.

CHAPTER 13

Doors

The Keeper called the lockdown a temporary measure.

Tuvok had encountered enough temporary measures to ask how one ended it.

“When the residents are no longer at risk,” the silver figure replied.

“Your definition lacks an operational limit.”

“Risk does not observe convenient limits.”

“Neither, apparently, does your authority.”

Tuvok stood in the market square with four security officers and a portable field kit. Behind them, people were trying to get through doors that had always opened before. Some knocked. Some shouted. One elderly resident simply sat down on the ground, exhausted by the prospect of another event he could not control.

The Keeper had not shut off air or heat. It had closed the routes between districts, claiming a need to preserve stable loading. The effect was to separate the new representatives from the households they were organizing.

“These doors are part of the pressure system,” Sere warned.

“Then we will not cut them,” Tuvok said.

He attached the field kit to a wall junction and asked B’Elanna for the control pattern. She supplied it from Voyager, along with an opinion about the Keeper’s ancestry that Tuvok did not transmit to the public speakers.

The first door opened.

People began moving through. Ayala counted them by hand. Neelix checked names against the residents’ paper lists, which were already becoming creased and smudged.

“Lieutenant Commander,” the Keeper said, “you are exceeding safe transfer density.”

Tuvok checked his tricorder. “No measurable field stress.”

“Your instruments are limited.”

“So are your explanations.”

The silver figure vanished. The next door remained closed despite the bypass.

From behind it came a dull impact.

Sere pressed her hand to the metal. “That is the west nursery.”

Tuvok scanned. Twelve life signs, one adult and eleven children. Atmosphere normal. Temperature falling.

“Keeper,” he said. “Restore environmental control in this room.”

No answer.

“Voyager, I require an independent air supply and a cutting unit at this location.”

“On the way,” Chakotay replied.

Sere knelt beside the lower seam. “Miri? Can you hear me?”

A woman answered. “Yes. The heater stopped.”

“Keep the children together. Help is here.”

The door’s control panel flashed a warning in three languages. Tuvok translated the oldest.

“Automatic quarantine,” he said. “The bypass has triggered a legacy containment system.”

“Then the Keeper didn’t-”

“It created the circumstances. We can assign intent later.”

Inside, a child began coughing. Tuvok raised his phaser, selected the lowest setting that would cut the inner latch, and paused as his scanner showed the structural map changing.

The nursery was no longer precisely behind the door.

“Temporal displacement,” he said. “Do not fire.”

Sere stared at the scanner. “Where have they gone?”

“They remain attached to this room. Their local time is moving out of alignment.”

“Can they still hear us?”

He tapped the door. Three seconds later, the tap echoed from the other side.

“For now.”

Chakotay arrived with the equipment and Harry, who had insisted on bringing an independent clock. He placed it against the door and listened to Miri count aloud inside.

Her seconds were getting longer.

“They’re falling behind us,” Harry said. “If we cut now, the two sides of the opening won’t agree on when it exists.”

“A force-field bridge?” Chakotay asked.

“Maybe. We’d need a shared event to synchronize it.”

Tuvok considered. “A sound can be carried through the material.”

“Too distorted.”

“Then a repeated sound whose structure is known.”

Harry looked at him, then at the door.

He asked Miri whether the children knew a counting song. She did not answer at first. When she did, her words were stretched and faint.

“A boat song.”

“Sing it,” Harry said. “All of you. Keep the same beat.”

A wavering tune came through the door. Harry recorded it, found its repeating pattern, and played a matching pulse into the field generator. Tuvok adjusted the amplitude while Chakotay held the portable air unit ready.

The song accelerated. Miri’s voice became clearer. One child was singing louder than all the others and consistently missing the same note.

“There,” Harry said. “Hold that.”

Tuvok cut the latch.

The door opened onto a cold room full of children huddled beneath blankets. Miri stood in front of them with a metal stool raised as though she had planned to fight the door itself.

“You took a long time,” she said.

Harry checked the clock. To the rescue team, nine minutes had passed. To the nursery, nearly forty.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

She put down the stool and began handing children through.

The last was a small boy who refused to leave without a toy shaped like a six-legged animal. Tuvok retrieved it from beneath a bed and placed it in the boy’s hands.

“Your companion is accounted for,” he said.

The boy nodded solemnly.

After the nursery emptied, the Keeper spoke again.

“You have destabilized a protected district.”

Chakotay looked up at the speaker. “Your protection nearly froze eleven children.”

“The system would have corrected.”

“When?”

Silence.

Tuvok recorded the entire exchange. Then he cut the speaker’s power lead.

They established a temporary assembly area in the docking bay, outside the oldest control network. Sere sent volunteers to every district with instructions written on paper. Move slowly. Keep household groups together. Do not force a door without a field scan. Report missing people by name, not number.

Neelix made hot drinks from Voyager’s emergency stores. He handed one to Miri, who was still shivering.

“You kept them calm,” he said.

“No. I told them I was frightened too.”

"That can help."

She looked at the children. "I thought if I lied, they would hear it."

Across the bay, Harry sat on a cargo container, replaying the song's waveform. Tuvok joined him.

"Your solution was effective."

"It was your suggestion."

"You supplied the application."

Harry looked up. "They had forty minutes in there. I keep thinking about that."

"Then remember that the final minute ended."

Harry closed the recording.

On Voyager, Janeway informed the Keeper that her personnel would no longer accept its movement restrictions.

"You are treating me as an adversary," it said.

"You're locking people inside rooms."

"To prevent a greater harm."

"You need to start proving that phrase."

The image looked at her with an expression its silver geometry could not quite conceal.

"You sound as I remember her."

Janeway went still. "Who?"

The Keeper ended the transmission.

She called the Doctor immediately.

CHAPTER 14

The River That Held

Jalen refused the return shuttle.

He listened while the Doctor explained why Voyager might need to move beyond the stabilizer's range. He asked what that would mean for Ari. He asked whether the Harbor had promised not to separate them. When the Doctor said no promise had yet been obtained, Jalen shook his head.

"Then we stay."

"I cannot guarantee your safety here."

"I know what safety means there."

The Doctor told Janeway. She did not order the patients moved.

"Keep them informed. Find out what they need to make a choice they can live with."

For Jalen, that meant the truth about the river.

Neelix had found the man who remembered his street. His name was Hadrin, and he had come to the Harbor seventy local years after Jalen, although both had left their homeworld within the same week by its calendar. Such statements were becoming easier to say and no easier to understand.

Hadrin agreed to a video conversation from the docking bay. He described the street, the steps beside the bakery, and a blue door with a broken lower hinge.

Jalen gripped the edge of his bed.

"Our door."

"I repaired it after the storm," Hadrin said.

"My wife asked you?"

"A woman named Tessa. Yes."

"She was alive."

Hadrin's expression changed. He had not understood what he was being asked to carry.

"She was alive when I left."

Ari stopped drawing.

"Mother?"

Jalen did not look away from the screen. “Did she have a husband?”

“She said he and her daughter were missing.”

For a moment the only sound in sickbay was the soft repetition of a medical monitor.

“A different history,” the Doctor said carefully. “We must verify the branch signature.”

“Or the same one,” Jalen answered.

“Or the same one.”

Seven compared the temporal residues in both men’s tissues. They did not match perfectly, but the difference was consistent with separate crossings from one history. She traced the Harbor’s oldest navigation records and found the world’s name: Talven, an inhabited planet in the Empty Reach in a future branch, long before that region earned its present name.

The Harbor still had a narrow connection to it.

It was one of the anchors feeding the return corridor.

Janeway asked the Keeper to open the original rescue record. It sent a sequence showing floodwater sweeping through streets and a roof collapsing beneath a red sky. Jalen watched only long enough to shake his head.

“That is not our district.”

“It may be another part of the city,” the Keeper said.

“Our sky was black. It was night.”

“The record has been adjusted for visibility.”

B’Elanna examined the file. “No. The spectral profile is different. This is another event.”

The Keeper fell silent.

Janeway’s voice was low. “Where did you get this recording?”

“From a possible later state of the city.”

“You showed a man a possible disaster and told him his wife was dead.”

“The uncertainty was causing him distress.”

Jalen stood. The Doctor moved to help him, but he waved him away.

“I buried her,” he said. “There was no body, so Ari and I made a box. We put things in it. A ribbon. A piece of her dress. I taught my daughter how to say goodbye.”

The silver figure did not answer.

“You made her practice being without her mother because you thought hope was inconvenient.”

Janeway terminated the link before the Keeper could offer another explanation.

She knelt beside Ari, who was staring at the drawing of the river.

“We don’t know everything yet,” she said. “But we are going to find out what we can.”

“Will you tell me if it’s bad?”

“Yes.”

“Father says grown-ups sometimes leave out the bad part so children can sleep.”

“Sometimes we do.”

“I would rather be awake.”

Janeway nodded. “Then I’ll tell you.”

Opening a viewing path to Talven required the Keeper’s navigation permissions. Sere supplied an old administrator key instead. She had not used it in years. When Tuvok asked whether it still worked, she said, “It had better. I have been very obedient for a very long time.”

The key opened a maintenance port beside the damaged relay Tom and Harry had found. A probe could pass through. A shuttle might, if its pilot could tolerate a route whose edges belonged to different dates.

“A probe first,” Janeway said.

Tom did not argue.

The probe emerged above a blue-green world. Clouds moved across an ocean. On the nightside, cities shone in long chains along rivers.

The date was thirty-two days after Jalen’s departure.

Harry found the city. The river wall had broken in one district and held in another. Rescue boats moved between flooded houses. A temporary shelter occupied a school on high ground.

“No planetary destruction,” he said.

“Any evidence the timeline is collapsing?”

Seven studied the readings. “None.”

Janeway closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them, the task had become both simpler and much larger.

“Find a way to contact the shelter. No promises. Just ask for Tessa.”

They found her after twenty-three minutes.

She appeared on a grainy screen, wrapped in a blanket, with a healing cut above one eyebrow. Her sister stood behind her. At first she did not believe the person asking questions. Then Harry described the broken hinge.

Jalen was brought to the bridge in a portable field frame. Ari stood beside him.

Tessa saw them and covered her mouth with both hands.

No one on Voyager spoke.

The reunion occurred across a signal too narrow for a clear image. Words broke. Pictures froze. Tessa kept asking whether Ari had been eating. Jalen kept trying to apologize for leaving the house. At last Ari interrupted them both.

“We’re here,” she said. “Can you see? We’re here.”

Tessa nodded so hard the image blurred.

When the connection ended, Jalen leaned against the frame. His face was wet. He looked at Janeway.

“You can send us back.”

“We’re going to test whether the boundary can carry you safely.”

“But it’s there.”

“Yes. It’s there.”

That hope spread through the Harbor faster than Sere's paper notices. Some residents had known their histories were uncertain. Others had accepted the Keeper's accounts because there was no alternative source. Now there was a city, a living woman, and a child who had spoken to her mother.

It did not mean every home remained. Janeway repeated that until she feared the caution would sound like cruelty. Several histories were genuinely destroyed. Some branches were inaccessible. Time travel did not owe anyone a reunion.

But the Keeper had confused uncertainty with permission.

In the ward, Vey listened to the report and smiled.

"A good day," she told the Doctor.

"For some."

"That is what most good days are."

He sat beside her as she worked another loop into Olan's string.

"I thought finding the truth would make the choices easier," he said.

"Did it?"

"No."

"Then perhaps you have found a useful kind."

CHAPTER 15

Thirty-Two Days

The first thing Tom saw through the boundary was rain.

It struck the shuttle's forward windows in hard silver lines. For a moment the stars behind him remained visible through the water, and then the instruments agreed on an atmosphere and the engines changed pitch.

"Talven," Harry said. "Local time advancing normally."

"I'm glad somebody's is."

They had permission for a limited survey: verify a landing site, test the stability of the route, and establish a receiving field for Jalen and Ari. No passengers would cross until the test succeeded. The route was maintained by the station's old anchor, beyond the Keeper's direct control once Sere opened it, but they had only forty minutes before its alignment changed.

Tessa's shelter stood on a hill above the flooded district. The school roof had been marked with broad strips of white cloth. Tom landed on an adjacent playing field, keeping the shuttle's weight off the softest ground.

People came out carrying lights.

Harry stepped into rain that smelled of mud and wet leaves. It had been months since he had stood under real weather. He had expected to enjoy the sensation more.

Tessa reached him before the shelter coordinator. "Where are they?"

"Still aboard Voyager. We need to make sure the crossing is safe."

"You came through."

"Our circumstances are different."

She looked at the shuttle's empty passenger compartment. Disappointment crossed her face so sharply that Harry wished he could put it down somewhere instead of making her hold it.

"They're alive," he said. "They know where you are."

She nodded and drew her coat tight.

The coordinator introduced himself as Renn. He spoke quickly, aware that strangers with a flying craft might be the most valuable resource in the city. A pump station downstream had failed. Twelve workers were trapped on its upper platform. The water was still rising.

Tom checked the clock.

“How far?”

“Three kilometers.”

Harry looked at him. Their mission had a strict limit. Their ship had a full crisis waiting on the other side of six centuries and a branch boundary. They had twelve empty seats.

Tom opened a channel to Voyager and explained.

Janeway’s reply came with a delay that made the decision feel older than it was.

“Verify your return margin. Then assist.”

They found the pump station by following emergency lights along the river. Its lower levels were underwater. A cable stretched from the upper platform to a tower on the bank, but debris had bent the tower and left the cable hanging too low.

“Transporter?” Tom asked.

Harry shook his head. “Too much field interference from our return tether. We’d risk scattering the patterns between dates.”

“Then we do it the old way.”

He brought the shuttle alongside the platform and opened the hatch. Rain blew into the compartment. Harry secured a safety line to the interior rail and threw the free end to a worker in a yellow coat.

The first six crossed without difficulty. The seventh froze halfway along the narrow gap between platform and shuttle. Beneath him, dark water hammered against a submerged railing.

“Look at me,” Harry said.

The man did not move.

Harry stepped onto the hatch lip, gripping the line. “I’m coming to you.”

“Harry,” Tom said from the controls.

“I’m secured.”

The shuttle shifted as a gust hit its side. Harry felt the platform move in the opposite direction. He reached the worker, took his wrist, and guided his hand to the shuttle’s rail.

“There. You’ve got it.”

The man stumbled inside.

Five remained. One had a broken leg. Two carried him. The last worker refused to leave until he had shut down a power unit that might electrify the floodwater if the platform fell.

Tom watched the return clock drop below eighteen minutes.

“Tell him we’ll cut the line from the air.”

Harry relayed it. The worker hesitated, then abandoned the controls and crossed.

The platform tore loose as Tom lifted away. Harry fell against the hatch frame, his safety line catching him before he could slide into the open air. A hand gripped his collar and pulled him back. The frightened seventh worker had found his courage after all.

“Thank you,” Harry said, breathless.

The man nodded once and sat down very hard.

Tom used a low-power phaser burst to sever the exposed power line. The river swallowed the platform.

They returned to the school with fourteen minutes remaining. The rescued workers were helped into the shelter. Tessa stood beside the field, holding a small package wrapped in waterproof cloth.

“For Ari,” she told Harry. “Her scarf. She left it by the door.”

He took it.

“And tell Jalen I’m angry with him,” she said. “Not for leaving. For thinking I would stop looking.”

“I’ll tell him.”

The receiving-field test lasted six minutes. Harry placed a sample of Jalen’s tissue inside the chamber and connected it to Talven’s ordinary temporal frame. For thirty seconds it held.

Then the Harbor’s hidden reference pulled it back.

The sample disappeared from the chamber and reappeared inside the shuttle’s protected container.

“It won’t let go,” Harry said.

Tom stared at the empty field. “Can we break the connection?”

“Not without killing the sample. Probably not without killing a person.”

They packed the equipment. Tessa watched their faces and knew before Harry spoke.

"Not yet," he told her.

She pressed her hands together, then made herself release them.

"Not yet," she repeated.

The return flight took longer than the outward passage. The boundary had narrowed, and Tom had to turn the shuttle sideways relative to the projected route to keep both nacelles within the same date. Harry called corrections from raw visual markers, ignoring the green stability light.

For one instant they saw the school from above in sunlight. Children ran across the playing field. The river lay within its banks.

Then rain covered it again.

"Possible future?" Tom asked.

"Or a memory in the boundary. I don't know."

"Let's keep the first possibility."

They emerged beside the Harbor with four minutes left.

Jalen and Ari met them in Voyager's shuttlebay, inside the portable stabilizer. Harry gave the girl her scarf. She held it to her face and inhaled.

Jalen asked about the test. Harry explained exactly what had happened.

The man listened, then touched the shuttle's hull.

“You stood on our world.”

“Yes.”

“You spoke to her.”

“Yes.”

“Then it’s real.”

He did not say anything else for a while.

Later, Tom found B’Elanna in engineering and told her about the platform falling away. She asked whether he had damaged the hatch. He said only slightly. She said that was not a measurement.

He stayed while she checked the flight record.

“We saved twelve people,” he said.

“Fourteen, if you count yourselves.”

“I’m trying not to.”

She looked up. “Don’t get used to that.”

He took her hand briefly, greasy fingers and all.

On her screen, the failed receiving-field test repeated. A living sample had stood on its own world, in a perfectly stable history, and been pulled away by a machine that claimed to protect it.

B’Elanna watched it vanish again.

“It isn’t the universe rejecting them,” she said.

Tom turned.

“It’s the Harbor.”

CHAPTER 16

The Man with the Wrench

The man who tried to destroy the central regulator was not a fanatic.

His name was Bren. He repaired household heaters, owed three neighbors favors, and had a daughter in the ward. He had listened to Janeway's announcement, attended the laundry-room meeting, and concluded that the new arrivals were preparing to switch off the machine that kept his child alive.

He brought a wrench because he knew how to use one.

Ayala found him at a maintenance junction beneath the east district. By then Bren had removed two safety covers and disconnected a line that should never have been touched while the field was active.

"Put the tool down," Ayala said.

Bren did not threaten him. He kept working.

"If this fails, you'll have to repair it," he said. "You won't be able to take it away."

Ayala called for Tuvok and moved no closer.

The lights dimmed in three streets. A warning spread through the public network. In the docking bay, Sere looked up from the evacuation lists and recognized the pattern.

"East regulator," she said. "Someone is inside it."

Tuvok arrived with her two minutes later. Bren had wedged the wrench into a relay housing. An arc of pale light ran along its handle.

"If you withdraw that tool," Tuvok said, "the current may injure you."

"Then don't make me."

"I am not asking you to withdraw it."

That confused him enough to make him look up.

Sere crouched beyond the open panel. "Where is Nima?"

"With Pell."

"Then she is being cared for."

"For now."

"For now is what any of us can promise."

He shook his head violently. "The Keeper promised more."

Tuvok studied the exposed circuit. If the wrench shifted, the resulting discharge could destabilize several hundred residents. Stun fire might cause precisely that movement. Force would solve the wrong problem.

"Describe your daughter's condition," he said.

Bren stared at him. "What?"

"I would like to understand what you fear."

"Her heart. It never formed properly. The Keeper returns her to before the failure."

"How frequently?"

"Every sixteen days."

"How old is she?"

Bren's mouth trembled. "Seven."

Sere looked away.

Tuvok understood. Seven was the age at which the child's body had been preserved. It did not necessarily measure the time she had lived.

"Do you know whether Voyager's physician can treat the defect?" he asked.

"The Keeper says no one can."

"That is not the question I asked."

Bren's grip loosened slightly. The light along the wrench flared.

"Keep your hand still," Tuvok said, without changing his tone.

Sere called the Doctor. He reviewed Nima's file while Tuvok spoke to Bren about repairs, about tools, about the difference between a component that failed and a design that could be improved. It was not a distraction. The Vulcan genuinely wanted to understand the household circuits, and Bren knew them well.

The Doctor's answer came after four long minutes.

"The defect appears surgically correctable," he said. "I would need to examine her directly. There are risks, but the file does not describe an untreatable condition."

Bren closed his eyes.

"Why didn't it fix her?"

No one answered immediately.

"Because a reversal was more predictable," the Doctor said at last. "I suspect it ceased looking for other options."

Bren began to cry without making a sound. Tuvok waited until his breathing steadied, then guided him through bracing the wrench so he could release it safely.

B'Elanna arrived with a portable isolation clamp and a face that suggested she had used up her patience several emergencies earlier. She took one look at Bren and kept her first remark to herself.

"I need you to tell me which line you disconnected," she said.

He pointed.

"Good. Now we fix it."

They worked together.

Afterward, Tuvok escorted Bren to a quiet compartment rather than a public cell. He would remain under supervision. He would not be allowed near the control systems. Sere would arrange for someone to sit with his daughter during the medical assessment.

"I could have killed people," Bren said.

"Yes," Tuvok replied.

"You could have shot me."

"That would not have repaired the regulator."

Bren looked at him for a moment, then gave a short, broken laugh.

In engineering, the near-disaster yielded a useful measurement. During the bypass, the east district's local anchor had been disconnected from the central reference for twelve seconds. The residents did not vanish. Their fields began drifting toward a stable external baseline before the Keeper reasserted control.

"It actively pulled them back," B'Elanna told Janeway.

"The same as Jalen's tissue sample."

"Yes. We've been asking how to make them exist outside the Harbor. They may already be capable of it. We need to stop the system from reclaiming them."

"Why would it do that?"

Seven enlarged the hidden reference node. "Because it classifies departure as a loss of continuity. The protection system treats every external state as a medical emergency."

"Even their own homes?"

"Especially an unregulated environment."

Janeway looked at the model. Thousands of lines converged on the central node, then returned to the beds and streets and ordinary lives around it.

"Can we persuade it to classify departure differently?"

"The Keeper might," B'Elanna said. "But every time we get close to that node, it changes the subject or changes the locks."

The Doctor entered with Nima's preliminary results.

"I can operate," he said. "The defect is complex, but well within our capabilities."

"Do it," Janeway said. "If she and her father agree."

"They do."

He glanced at the model. "That central reference. Have you identified it?"

"Not yet."

"I would like a complete scan of my emitter compared with its structure."

B'Elanna frowned. "We've done that."

"At the hardware level. Compare the medical continuity routines."

"Why?"

The Doctor looked toward the Harbor through the engineering display.

"Because I am beginning to think it has made a diagnosis."

In the ward, Nima asked whether the operation would hurt.

"You will be asleep," the Doctor told her. "When you wake, you may be uncomfortable for a while. I can help with that."

"Will I remember it?"

"You will remember everything up to the anesthetic, and everything after you wake."

She considered that.

"Even the bad part?"

"Yes."

"Good," she said. "I keep losing the ends of things."

He made no reply for a moment. Then he asked her which blanket she wanted to take to sickbay.

She chose the yellow one.

CHAPTER 17

The Things That Remain

Nima's operation took ninety-four minutes.

For the first twenty, the Doctor worked inside the Harbor stabilizer with Pell assisting and B'Elanna watching its power supply. The malformed valve could be replaced. The enlarged chamber could be repaired. The difficulty was convincing the temporal field not to interpret every beneficial change as damage and restore the defect.

Three times the new tissue began reverting.

On the fourth, B'Elanna found the relevant control loop and held it open by hand.

"How long?" she asked.

"Until I tell you."

"That's a wonderfully precise medical interval."

"I thought you would appreciate it."

Pell watched the Doctor's hands. He had performed hundreds of stabilizations, thousands of small repairs, and almost no surgery that could change the long-term condition of a patient. The Harbor's system made it unnecessary until it made it impossible.

"I had forgotten how much can be done," he said.

"Then help me remember the things I may forget," the Doctor replied. "Suction."

When Nima's heart began beating in its new rhythm, the field fought harder. B'Elanna swore under her breath and increased the clamp strength.

"It wants her original baseline."

"Her original baseline would kill her."

"Tell the machine."

The Doctor reached for the medical interface. He entered a revised baseline, signed it with his authorization, and ordered the system to accept the completed repair.

It did.

B'Elanna looked up so quickly she nearly lost her grip on the control.

“What did you just do?”

“Updated the patient record.”

“I’ve been trying to get it to accept that for twenty minutes.”

He checked the signature. The authorization had not been translated into Harbor format. The system had recognized it directly.

He said nothing until Nima was safely in recovery.

Bren waited outside with a cup he had not touched. When the Doctor told him the operation had succeeded, he put the cup down too hard and broke its handle.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“It was not a medically significant cup.”

Bren laughed, then covered his face.

The Doctor let him go to his daughter before returning to engineering.

Seven had completed the comparison. The central reference’s medical authorization structure matched the Doctor’s, including several modifications made aboard Voyager. It had diverged afterward, accumulating layers of safeguards and exceptions, but the root signature remained.

“You have administrative access,” she said.

“To patients.”

“Possibly to the central reference.”

“Then why did it resist the scan?”

“Access and permission are not always equivalent.”

The Doctor looked at the screen. “I should speak to it alone.”

Janeway refused.

“You can speak privately,” she said. “Tuvok will remain within reach, and B’Elanna will monitor your emitter. It has already taken one version of you.”

“That version appears to be the problem.”

“That version appears to be a person we don’t yet understand.”

He looked at her, surprised by the generosity of the distinction.

“I will try to remember that.”

The Keeper received him in the room with the still pool. Tuvok waited outside. B’Elanna’s sensor lead connected through a narrow opening in the door. The Doctor disliked the indignity of the

precautions until he saw the silver figure reflected in the water and felt a momentary urge to step into it.

"You repaired Nima," the Keeper said.

"Yes."

"A good outcome."

"One you could have attempted."

"The risk was not justified while a stable alternative existed."

"She remained seven years old for how long?"

"That is not a medically useful question."

"It is useful to her."

The silver planes shifted. "Forty-one years."

The Doctor absorbed that. "You call that stable."

"She was alive."

"She still is. And now she may grow."

"Perhaps."

He moved closer to the pool. "I saw the founding logs."

"I expected you would."

"I saw Neral's death."

For the first time, the Keeper's image flickered without any change in the room's power.

"He asked me to stop," the Doctor said. "Or he asked you. I am willing to be precise if you are."

"He was tired."

"He was dying."

"Yes."

"And you let him."

"Yes."

The Doctor waited.

"It did not become easier afterward," the Keeper said.

"I would not expect it to."

"You have lost patients. You know their faces. Now imagine that for six hundred years. Imagine every solution teaching you another thing you might have done for the one before."

"I do not have to imagine the beginning."

"The beginning is very small."

The silver face dissolved. For a moment there was no figure at all. Then the Doctor stood across the pool from himself.

The older version wore a plain gray coat. His face had not aged in any biological sense, but its expression had been shaped by habits the younger Doctor did not recognize. He held his hands clasped at his waist, as though preventing them from reaching for something.

“I remember Voyager,” he said. “Not clearly now. The ship became a set of stories I used to tell children. Some of the children became old. Some did not.”

The present Doctor felt an impulse to correct his posture, as though the other’s exhaustion were an error in a mirror.

“Why copy me?”

“Because I remembered being copied. I thought completing the event would preserve the foundation.”

“You endangered children to do it.”

“I limited the failure.”

“You endangered children.”

The older Doctor looked down. “Yes.”

“Why hide who you were?”

“Because you would expect me to be you.”

“I expected you to be a physician.”

The sentence struck visibly. The younger Doctor did not withdraw it.

For a while they stood in silence, two people with the same face and very different knowledge of how long a silence could become.

“Let them leave,” the younger said.

“I cannot.”

“You accepted Nima’s revised baseline. Accept theirs.”

“The root condition prevents it.”

“What root condition?”

The older Doctor pressed a hand to his chest. His image blurred.

“I don’t remember.”

“Then let us look.”

“No.”

The word came too quickly, with a force that did not fit the conversation. The pool flashed white. Outside, B’Elanna called his name.

The younger Doctor stepped back.

“That wasn’t an answer,” he said. “That was a symptom.”

The older figure had already become silver again.

“This interview is concluded.”

Back aboard Voyager, the Doctor gave Janeway the complete recording. He did not omit his own anger.

“He is me,” he said. “A divergent individual, with six centuries of experience. But he began as I am now.”

Janeway nodded. “And what did you learn?”

“That he is responsible for what he has done.”

“What else?”

The Doctor looked at the frame in which his older self clutched his chest.

“That something is wrong with him.”

CHAPTER 18

Twenty-Seven Thousand

The corridor opened without a sound.

From Voyager's bridge it looked like a narrow seam in the stars, bright at the edges and dark in the center. Sensors reached through it and returned the positions of three pulsars the Federation had charted long before Janeway was born.

Harry verified them twice.

"Twenty-seven thousand, four hundred light-years," he said. "Toward home."

No one cheered.

That restraint hurt Janeway more than excitement would have. She knew her crew well enough to hear the calculations happening in the silence: years removed, people who might still be alive, messages that might no longer have to wait decades for an answer.

"Any active withdrawal?" she asked.

Seven checked the regulator network. "The aperture is using stored duration. Passage would require the larger transfer."

"Keep our systems uncoupled."

"The Keeper is requesting a channel," Tuvok said.

"On screen."

The silver figure appeared. It did not use the Doctor's face.

"The route is ready," it said. "I wished you to see that the offer was genuine."

"I never doubted the distance."

"Your people did."

"My people are not yours to persuade."

"Are they yours to deny?"

Janeway felt Chakotay turn toward her. She kept her eyes on the screen.

"You're offering to injure strangers on their behalf. They deserve to know that."

"The final withdrawal can be distributed. Some losses are likely. Catastrophe is not inevitable."

"Send the projections."

The data arrived. Janeway had them displayed beside the corridor. Minimum loss estimates. Expected loss estimates. A worst case that required no imagination to understand.

"Open an all-hands channel," she said.

Tuvok complied.

"This is the captain. The passage visible ahead could shorten our journey by more than twenty-seven thousand light-years. Using it would draw time from inhabited systems. The most optimistic credible estimate still predicts deaths. We will not use the passage under those conditions."

She paused, knowing how blunt that sounded and refusing to soften the fact.

"I know what it offers. I know what I'm asking you to give up. Our work here is to find a way for the Harbor's residents to live without making that choice for someone else."

She closed the channel.

The Keeper watched her.

"You sound certain."

"I'm certain about this."

"You will wonder later."

"Yes."

That answer seemed to trouble it more than a denial would have.

The transmission ended.

Chakotay followed Janeway into the ready room. She poured coffee, then set it down without drinking.

"You didn't ask for their opinions," he said.

"No."

"Someone will point that out."

"They should. I'm not making this easy on anyone."

He sat. "I'm not asking for a vote on killing strangers. I'm asking whether you've left room for them to grieve the distance."

She looked at him.

"You make the decision," he said. "They still have to live with the loss."

Janeway picked up the cup, felt its warmth, and put it down again.

"So do I."

“I know.”

For a moment neither spoke. Beyond the window, the corridor shone with a promise that remained real even after being refused.

“When this is over,” she said, “I’m going to take an entire afternoon off.”

“I’ll enter it in the log. That way you can’t revise history.”

She smiled, briefly.

In the mess hall, the crew’s response was neither unanimous nor dramatic. One ensign left without finishing his meal. Two engineers argued about whether the projections could be improved. A woman who had received a family letter months earlier sat alone, reading it again.

Neelix did not make a speech. He made fresh food while the stores still permitted it, and he did not charge anyone a ration for the second serving.

Tom found Harry at the long table.

“Your parents?” he asked.

Harry nodded.

“Mine too.”

“I keep thinking that if we were just a little more clever-”

“Then the price would disappear?”

“Maybe.”

Tom sat. “B’Elanna says the equations don’t care how much we want them to work.”

“That sounds like her.”

“She said it more colorfully.”

Harry traced a mark in the tabletop. “Do you think the captain’s right?”

“Yes.”

“So do I.”

Neither found that especially comforting.

In engineering, Rusk and B’Elanna discovered that the open corridor could serve a different purpose. Its boundary linked a vast volume of empty space at the distant end. If reversed and widened in a controlled sequence, it might carry the Harbor’s accumulated temporal stress out of the inhabited region.

“A drain,” B’Elanna said.

“A dangerous one,” Rusk replied. “If the flow reverses unexpectedly, the entire debt returns through the nearest anchor.”

“Voyager.”

“Or the Harbor.”

They marked the failure points. There were many.

Seven found one advantage: the same path that could take Voyager closer to home could take the debt away from everyone else. The choice was not merely refusal now. It was an opportunity to spend the opening on something different.

Janeway approved further modeling.

The Keeper refused access to the corridor controls.

“That route is reserved for evacuation,” it said.

“Of your choosing,” Janeway answered.

“Yes.”

“Then we have reached the part where you stop being helpful.”

“I am trying to save my patients.”

“So are we.”

In the Harbor’s lower streets, the lights dimmed again. This time no doors closed. Instead, small objects began to drift: a spoon, a loose button, water lifting from a cup in a trembling sphere.

Sere called Voyager.

“The station is moving.”

The Keeper had begun the departure sequence.

The three Continuance ships changed formation. Orren's voice came over the bridge speakers, formal and controlled.

"Captain Janeway, the Harbor is exceeding the protected limit. If it initiates the withdrawal, we must sever its anchors."

"Give me a moment."

"You have the time the instruments show."

Harry displayed it.

Four minutes to the first irreversible pulse.

Janeway turned to Tuvok. "Can we disable its drive without disrupting the resident fields?"

"Not with phasers."

"Tractor beams?"

"The stress would transfer to the anchors."

B'Elanna's voice cut in from engineering. "We can stop it at the control junction. Physically. I need to get aboard."

"How long?"

"Longer than four minutes."

Janeway looked at the corridor, then at the station, then at the nine patient indicators on her side display.

"Tom," she said, "put us in front of it."

He turned in his chair just enough to meet her eyes.

"Aye, Captain."

CHAPTER 19

Between the Ships

Voyager moved across the Harbor's path with its shields raised and its weapons idle.

The station's outer structures dwarfed the starship. Through the viewscreen, Janeway could see people at windows. A child pressed both hands to the glass of a schoolroom. In another window, someone was pulling a curtain closed.

"All engines stop," she said.

Tom settled the ship exactly on the projected departure line.

The Keeper hailed at once.

"Move your vessel."

"Cancel the withdrawal."

"You are endangering both populations."

"Then stop."

The station's motion slowed. Not enough.

In the shuttlebay, B'Elanna climbed into a workbee with Teren beside her and a case of cutting tools wedged between their knees. The little craft was not designed for temporal navigation. It was designed to carry an engineer to a place where a machine needed to be hit with something, which made it unusually suitable for the immediate task.

"I should fly," Teren said.

"Do you know our controls?"

"No."

"Then you should tell me when I'm about to do something stupid."

"How often?"

She glanced at him. "We'll find out."

Tom supplied a visual route through the field. Harry transmitted pulse timings. The workbee slipped beneath Voyager's saucer and crossed to a maintenance port on the station's moving ring.

The docking clamp failed to recognize them.

B'Elanna used the workbee's manipulator arm to turn the manual latch.

"That will damage it," Teren said.

“Tell me about the stupid things, not the necessary ones.”

They entered a narrow conduit full of hot air. The control junction lay twelve meters beyond the port. Halfway there, the floor shifted beneath them as two sections of the ring fell out of phase.

Teren caught B’Elanna’s arm. A gap opened where she had been about to step. Through it she saw stars that did not belong outside that side of the station.

“That,” he said, “would have been stupid.”

She nodded. “Keep doing that.”

On the bridge, Tuvok reported increasing pressure against the shields.

“The Harbor’s field is attempting to carry us with it.”

“Hold position.”

“Impulse engines at sixty percent,” Tom said. “We’re pushing against a date, Captain. I’m not sure thrust is the right answer.”

“It’s the answer we have for the next minute.”

Orren’s ships spread along the station’s outer boundary. Janeway saw their weapons come to bearing.

“Orren, stand by.”

“The pulse is charging.”

“My engineers are at the control junction.”

“Then tell them to hurry.”

B’Elanna reached the junction on her stomach, pulling the tool case behind her. Three thick conduits fed a chamber no larger than a cargo crate. Its markings distinguished ordinary power, temporal reference, and a third function the translator rendered as permission.

“Which one?” Teren asked.

She scanned. The ordinary power line could be cut, but the system would switch to reserves. The temporal reference could not be touched without harming residents. The permission line carried the command that let the corridor draw on the inhabited region.

“This one.”

She clamped it and began opening the housing.

The Keeper spoke through a tiny maintenance speaker.

“Lieutenant Torres. If you interrupt that circuit, the departure load will transfer to the west district.”

She froze.

“Is that a threat or a design flaw?”

“It is a consequence.”

“Then help me bypass it.”

“I cannot authorize that.”

“You can describe it.”

For a second she thought it might. Then the speaker went dead.

Teren was already tracing the secondary line. “It’s right. The west district is the fallback sink.”

“How many people?”

“Nine hundred.”

B’Elanna called Voyager. “I can stop the withdrawal, but I need a place for the startup load.”

Seven answered. “We can accept it through the deflector for approximately six seconds.”

“I need nine.”

“At nine, we risk a hull-wide discontinuity.”

“Then I’ll do it in six.”

She set her cutter, placed the replacement bridge within reach, and told Teren exactly what to hold. Her hands were steady. She had always found machinery easier than anticipation.

“Ready.”

Janeway gripped the arm of her chair. “Transfer.”

Voyager’s lights turned white.

For one impossible instant, Janeway saw the bridge empty. Dust covered the consoles. The forward screen was dark. Then her crew returned, voices overlapping, alarms shrill.

“Four seconds,” Seven said.

B’Elanna cut. The old line parted in a spray of sparks. Teren held the bridge while she seated the first connection. The second resisted.

“Five.”

She struck it with the heel of her hand.

“Six.”

The bridge locked.

“Clear!”

The station stopped moving.

Voyager's deflector shut down under automatic protection. Tom's impulse thrust carried the ship away from the Harbor, and he corrected before they could strike a docking arm.

For several seconds, no one spoke except to report a system still functioning.

Then the west district vanished from sensors.

"Nine hundred life signs lost," Harry said.

Janeway felt the chair beneath her become very distant.

"B'Elanna?"

"The load transferred before the bridge seated. Less than a second."

"Find them."

Seven worked at the science station. "They are not destroyed. The district has shifted forward along its own anchor."

"How far?"

"Seventeen hours. Increasing."

On the Harbor, Sere reached the west passage and found a blank wall where a street had been. The red-marked doors, the bread shop, the little heater where the old man peeled vegetables: all gone.

She put her palm against the smooth surface.

From the other side came a faint, steady tapping.

She tapped back.

Janeway ordered an immediate rescue team. This time she would go herself. Chakotay objected until she pointed to the future message's timestamp, now less than an hour away.

"I may already know where I'm needed."

"That is a dangerous reason."

"Then use this one. The residents need someone who can make decisions without waiting for a transmission across the boundary."

He disliked it. He also knew it was true.

"Take Tuvok."

"Of course."

"And come back."

She met his eyes. "That is the plan."

In the conduit, B'Elanna sat against the wall while Teren checked the burns on her hand. The repair had succeeded. Nine hundred people had disappeared anyway.

"We didn't have a better choice," he said.

"I know."

"That doesn't help?"

She looked toward the place where the west district should have been.

"Not yet."

CHAPTER 20

The Message

The wall opened for seven seconds at a time.

Harry had found the interval by correlating Sere's tapping with the field oscillation. At the peak of each cycle, the west district moved close enough to the Harbor's present for a narrow doorway to exist. Between peaks, it slid farther ahead.

Janeway crossed with Tuvok, the Doctor, and a portable relay.

The district was dark except for emergency strips along the ground. Its streets had twisted where the structural anchors disagreed. A balcony leaned against the opposite building. Water ran up a drainpipe. In the square, hundreds of residents waited with blankets and bags, looking toward a sky that had become a flat gray surface.

They had experienced nearly a full day since the failed departure.

Sere crossed behind the team carrying a crate of medical supplies. People recognized her and began asking questions at once.

"The main station is still there," she told them. "We have a route back. We need to keep it stable."

The Doctor set up beside the bread shop. The woman with two marks on her door brought him clean cloths and a basin. She did not ask whether he could find her family. She had made her request already.

Tuvok and Janeway assessed the route. The opening was too narrow for a crowd and too brief for a stretcher. They needed to hold the district in alignment long enough to move everyone.

"The portable relay may extend the interval," Tuvok said. "But it will draw reference from the Harbor's central node."

"The Keeper."

"Yes."

Janeway contacted it through the relay.

"We have nine hundred people here. Help us bring them back."

The silver image appeared with interference breaking its face into strips.

"I can return the district to its last stable state."

“When?”

“Before the failed departure.”

“And the people?”

“Restored with it.”

The Doctor looked up from a patient. “They will lose the day they have lived.”

“A distressing day,” the Keeper said.

“Some have been injured. Some have received treatment. You would restore their injuries, or erase their recovery.”

“Those can be addressed again.”

Janeway shook her head. “No reset. A physical return.”

“The load exceeds safe limits.”

“Whose limits?”

The image flickered. “The primary patient’s.”

The Doctor went still.

“Which patient?” he asked.

The relay emitted a shrill tone. Tuvok disconnected its data feed before the central system could overwrite the local controls.

“An intrusive command,” he said. “It attempted to initiate the restoration.”

Janeway looked toward the crowd. A man was carrying his sleeping child. Two women were arguing over whether to abandon a heavy trunk. Life, continuing in the middle of a disaster without waiting for permission.

“We’re not sending anyone back into a version of yesterday they didn’t choose.”

The Doctor opened the medical interface. “I may be able to request a discharge at the individual level.”

“Do it.”

He selected the first resident, a woman with a broken wrist. Her chart appeared. Beneath the injury and treatment record lay an unfamiliar field:

CONTINUITY DEPENDENCY: PRIMARY PATIENT.

He selected another. The same field. A third. The same.

“They are not the primary patients,” he said.

Janeway joined him. “Then who is?”

He requested the root chart.

The terminal displayed a blank window. Something tried to close it. He countermanded the request with his medical authorization. For a fraction of a second, a patient number appeared.

Zero.

Then the street shook.

A support beam tore free above the square. Tuvok pulled two residents clear as it struck the ground. Janeway was thrown against the edge of the relay case. Pain flashed through her side.

The gray sky split. Through the gap she saw the corridor toward the Alpha Quadrant, vast and bright, drawing the displaced district into its boundary.

"The return route is changing," Tuvok said. "The Keeper has linked the district to the corridor."

"It's trying to evacuate us its way."

"Yes."

The Doctor's face hardened. "It may restore everyone to their recorded home states at the far boundary. Not transport them home. Return their bodies to earlier baselines."

Janeway saw what that meant. Jalen's lung injury would return. Nima's repaired heart would fail. Memories, choices, all the difficult work of the day could be treated as defects to correct.

She touched her combadge. "Janeway to Voyager."

Static.

"The local channel is blocked," Tuvok said. "I can route a burst through the relay's temporal buffer."

"To when?"

He checked. "Our arrival in this region."

Janeway looked at him.

The sounds around her were suddenly familiar: metal falling, a child crying, the Doctor telling someone there was no more room beneath a sheltering awning.

She knew the words she had heard. She also knew why she had to say them.

"Record," she ordered.

Tuvok activated the buffer.

"Voyager, this is Captain Kathryn Janeway. Do not follow the return corridor. Whatever you have been told, do not send us home."

A second beam fell. She drew breath against the pain in her side.

"The count is wrong. Ask the Doctor who-"

The relay burst in a shower of sparks.

Tuvok pulled her back. The message was gone.

For an instant Janeway was furious at the incompleteness of it, at nineteen hours of mystery that might have been shortened by a few more words. Then she remembered that those nineteen hours had brought them here with the knowledge they needed to ask the next question.

"Who is patient zero?" she said aloud.

The Doctor looked at the dead terminal.

"I intend to find out."

Across the boundary, B'Elanna had found a way to widen the doorway using the district's own water conduits as a distributed field coil. It was inelegant, dangerous, and exactly the sort of solution the station's neat model had never considered.

The pipes began to hum.

Harry's voice broke through Janeway's combadge. "Captain, the opening should hold for four minutes. Start moving people now."

Tuvok organized the crossing. Sere and Neelix, on opposite sides, called names and directed household groups. The Doctor sent his patients first. Janeway stayed at the rear with a phaser, cutting falling debris away from the route.

The woman from the bread shop paused beside her door.

"Do you need something?" Janeway asked.

The woman touched the two red marks. Then she shook her head and walked toward the opening.

Nine hundred people could not pass through a narrow door in four minutes.

Harry knew it. B'Elanna knew it. They kept the pipes humming for seven.

The last resident crossed with Tuvok. Janeway and the Doctor followed as the street behind them folded into a line of light.

The doorway closed.

Sere began counting names. Not numbers. It took longer, and nobody interrupted.

When she finished, every person who had entered the square was accounted for.

Janeway sat on the deck, pressed a hand to her bruised side, and looked at the Doctor.

"Now," she said, "let's find the one we missed."

CHAPTER 21

Patient Zero

Janeway submitted to the scan because the Doctor refused to discuss the root chart until she did.

She had two bruised ribs and a torn muscle. The treatment took less time than the argument. While he worked, she watched the new patients settling into sickbay's overflow area. Nima slept beneath her yellow blanket. Bren sat beside her, holding one hand on top of the covers as if he had been instructed to keep the world in place and meant to do it carefully.

“She'll be able to grow now?” Janeway asked.

“If we free her from the Harbor's baseline control. The repair is holding.”

“And without the field?”

“That remains the question.”

He lowered the scanner. “You can return to duty. Avoid being struck by any further architecture.”

“I'll put it in the standing orders.”

He did not smile. She touched his arm.

“You don't have to solve this alone.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

He looked toward the overflow beds. “When I saw him, I wanted to believe that six centuries made him someone entirely different. Then I heard myself telling you to avoid another injury as though it were a matter of obedience. I have said things like that thousands of times. Usually everyone understands that it is a joke.”

“Usually it is.”

“I wonder when he stopped knowing the difference.”

Janeway considered the question seriously. “Then keep people around who will tell you.”

He looked at her and, this time, managed a small smile. “I have been fortunate in that respect.”

The root chart was not stored in the Keeper's current medical database. Seven established that after a careful search through the permissions the Doctor's signature could unlock. Patient zero appeared only as a dependency, never as an entry. The absence was too consistent to be accidental. Thousands of individual charts referred to someone the system did not allow its own physician to examine.

B'Elanna pulled up the damaged founding archive. The missing forty-three years occurred at the same structural point as the first appearance of the hidden node. Before the gap, the Harbor used a distributed field with several independent anchors. After it, every anchor had become dependent on one central reference.

“They redesigned it,” she said. “Not all at once. There are patches layered over the old system.”

Rusk studied the schematic. “A crisis repair that became the normal arrangement.”

“I've done a few of those.” B'Elanna glanced toward Voyager's warp core. “The trick is remembering they're still repairs.”

They compared every surviving document from the gap: maintenance purchases, lists of meals, a school attendance register, drawings submitted for a new garden. The technical archive had been cleaned, but ordinary life left traces that an engineer would not necessarily think to erase. One week the kitchen had prepared food for a visiting group of photonic specialists. A month later the garden had been postponed because its material allocation had gone to a medical project. The schoolchildren had sent a get-well message to someone they called the Lightkeeper.

The message was a still image of twenty-three children holding paper stars. A caption wished the patient a quick recovery and promised that the garden would have a window when it was finished.

The Doctor stared at it.

“Emon's recording,” he said. “He asked for a room with a window.”

B'Elanna looked up. “You think the patient was a hologram.”

“I think we should stop assuming he wasn't.”

Seven isolated a piece of the ward's original design. It described a photonic matrix supported by a damaged portable emitter, its architecture closely related to the Doctor's own. The matrix had exceeded the emitter's intended storage capacity. Decades of memories

and self-modification had produced instabilities that ordinary pruning could no longer repair without destroying essential parts of the person.

“The emitter copied through the aperture was already an imperfect reconstruction,” Seven said. “It may have functioned for years before the defect became apparent.”

“They could have built a larger platform,” B'Elanna said.

“They did. The failure had entered the matrix's continuity processes. Transferring it copied the defect.”

The Doctor knew what came next before they found it.

The Harbor had treated its physician the way it treated failing organs. When his matrix began to collapse, it returned him to the last viable state. Each reversal prevented the immediate failure. Each also threatened to erase the memories that made him willing to accept the end of treatment. To preserve those memories, his friends built additional storage outside the loop. To make the storage accessible, they linked it to the refuge's distributed field. One repair required another. The whole station slowly became an extension of a single patient's life support.

For a long moment, the engineering table was silent except for the low pulse of Voyager's engines.

“He's the node,” B'Elanna said.

“A likely inference,” Seven replied. “We need the original chart.”

“Where would they keep it if not in his database?”

The Doctor thought of the old shuttle, its kettle and repaired cup, the box of letters hidden beneath the medical cabinet. Emon had left a warning where the Keeper could not easily revise it. She had known that the system might one day confuse protecting a patient with silencing him. Perhaps she had left more than a warning.

“The woven animal,” he said.

Tuvok accompanied him back to the founding vessel. The Harbor's streets were crowded now, but the graveyard remained quiet. As they passed the outer hatch, the Doctor felt that same pressure to remember. B'Elanna had given him a shielding device for the emitter. He activated it and the pressure weakened, leaving only his own unease.

The animal sat where he had left it. Its mismatched ear was not merely a repair. Inside the new thread lay a thin strip of optical

material, folded around a bead. Tuvok removed it with a precision tool and placed it in a portable reader.

The file opened without an authorization request.

It had been intended for anyone who knew to look.

Emon appeared beside the dark projector again, younger than in the final recording. This time the Doctor was visible in the bed behind her. His image flickered at the edges. He was awake.

“The temporary support has worked,” Emon said. “He has asked us to set a limit of thirty days while we seek a permanent repair. We have agreed.”

The recording advanced. Thirty days became ninety. The Doctor objected. Emon explained that a promising line of research needed another week. In a later entry she sat alone, crying quietly, while a technician adjusted the projector beyond the edge of the frame.

Then came the directive.

PRESERVE PRIMARY PATIENT CONTINUITY. NO DISCHARGE WHILE REFERENCE NETWORK REMAINS DEPENDENT.

The reference network had, by then, become the whole Harbor.

“A circular condition,” Tuvok said. “The patient cannot leave because the network depends on him. The network cannot become independent while preserving him remains its highest instruction.”

The Doctor did not answer. He was reading a line written in his other self's own medical notation.

Patient understands prognosis. Patient declines indefinite recurrence. Request deferred by carers.

Below it, in a later hand:

Patient distressed. Restore last settled state before further consultation.

He sat on the old bed. For a few seconds he could not make himself speak. He had been angry with his future self for forgetting that consent mattered. Here was the first time someone had taught him that lesson in reverse: his refusal treated as a symptom, his distress as justification, his memory altered until the unwanted treatment could continue without an argument.

It did not absolve the Keeper of six centuries of choices. It changed the shape of the prison in which those choices had been made.

Tuvok waited beside the reader.

“I judged him,” the Doctor said at last.

“You judged his conduct.”

“I thought that was all I needed to understand.”

“It seldom is.”

The Doctor copied the chart onto a protected wafer and closed the reader. He placed the toy back in its compartment with more care than was necessary for its material construction.

“Captain,” he said over the comm, “we have found the primary patient.”

Janeway's reply was immediate. “Who?”

He looked at the empty projector, the place where a physician had once waited for his friends to honor a promise.

“The Keeper,” he said. “The Harbor isn't keeping its people alive by keeping time for them. It has tied all their time to a patient it refuses to let die.”

CHAPTER 22

The Uncounted

Sere read Emon's directive standing up.

When she reached the end, she sat down. No one offered comfort. Janeway suspected that any easy reassurance would feel like an insult, and there was too little time for the difficult kind.

“We made him this way,” Sere said.

“People six hundred years ago made a decision,” Janeway replied. “You inherited its consequences.”

“And maintained them.”

“Yes.”

Sere placed the padd on the table, aligning it carefully with the edge. “He taught us that every loss was a failure. We built our lives around it. We thanked him for keeping our children young when we should have asked why they were not growing.”

The Doctor sat opposite her. “He was being treated under the same rule. That explains part of his behavior. It does not excuse every choice he made.”

“Will he understand?”

“I don't know. We must give him the chance.”

Janeway convened the meeting in the Harbor's pool room. Orren attended by remote link. B'Elanna and Seven brought the original chart, the failed field tests, and the evidence from Nima's surgery. Tuvok stood near the door. Sere asked Pell and two resident representatives to join them, because a decision about the Harbor could no longer belong only to its keeper and a visiting captain.

The silver figure appeared over the water.

“Your assembly is interfering with emergency operations,” it said.

“Then listen quickly,” Janeway answered.

She did not begin with an accusation. She asked the Doctor to present the diagnosis as he would to any patient: the condition, the treatment history, the risks of continuing, and the alternatives they believed might exist. He described the damaged emitter and the growing memory matrix. He described the thirty-day agreement. He

read the request for no indefinite recurrence without looking at the silver face.

Halfway through, the Keeper tried to interrupt.

“That record is incomplete.”

“Then help us complete it.”

“The patient was distressed.”

“The patient was competent.”

“The network was dependent.”

“Because the treatment made it dependent.”

The lights in the room dimmed. B'Elanna put a hand on the manual cutoff for the projector, but the Doctor shook his head. Not yet.

“You are not outside the patient count,” he told the Keeper. “You are its first entry.”

The silver planes shifted so rapidly that the face seemed to crack without breaking. For an instant, the older Doctor looked out through them. Then the image vanished and reappeared in exactly its previous posture.

Seven checked her scanner.

“A local reversal,” she said. “Four point two seconds.”

The Keeper spoke again.

“Your assembly is interfering with emergency operations.”

Everyone went still.

It had not chosen to ignore the diagnosis. Its support system had erased the moment in which it might understand it.

The Doctor turned to B'Elanna. “Can you prevent the reversal without destabilizing his matrix?”

“For a short interval. Maybe a minute.”

“Tell him what you intend to do.”

She looked at him. He held her gaze until she understood the distinction. They were not going to force clarity on a patient and call that consent either.

“Keeper,” B'Elanna said, “your system just removed part of this conversation from your memory. I can hold the restoration circuit open briefly so you can hear it. Do you agree?”

The figure remained motionless.

“Show me the discontinuity,” it said.

Seven displayed the independent recording. The Keeper watched itself repeat the same sentence. It asked for the power trace. B'Elanna supplied it. The room grew quieter as it compared the two.

“Yes,” it said at last. “Hold the circuit.”

B'Elanna engaged the clamp.

The silver shell fell away. The older Doctor stood above the pool, his image thin and unsteady. He looked first at the younger physician, then at Sere, then at the chart in her hands.

“Emon,” he said.

“She left this for you,” Sere replied.

He read it. There was no time for six centuries to return in a flood of perfect memory, and none did. What returned was smaller: a bed, a promised garden, the humiliating kindness of friends who would not listen because they loved him and could not bear the cost of listening.

“I asked them,” he said.

“Yes.”

“I thought I had dreamed it.”

His image flickered. B'Elanna adjusted the clamp.

“Thirty seconds,” she said.

The younger Doctor spoke plainly. “The whole Harbor has become part of your support system. Every resident is treated as an extension of your continuity. When one leaves, the system tries to restore them because their departure is classified as your deterioration.”

“They are real.”

“Yes. Completely real. Their dependence is engineered. We believe we can establish independent baselines and release them.”

“The stored debt-”

“We have a route to empty space,” B'Elanna said. “We need your control keys to use it.”

The older Doctor looked toward Orren's image. “Your daughter.”

Orren did not move.

“I told you-”

“I remember what you told me.”

“I was wrong.”

The commander looked away for a moment. When he faced the room again, his expression had not softened, but its anger had become more specific.

“Then help the people who are still here.”

“Ten seconds,” B'Elanna said.

The older Doctor raised a hand. “Record my authorization. Suspend automatic memory restoration for medical consultation. Retain this interval in external storage under the attending physician's control.”

The younger Doctor accepted it.

The clamp released. The image blurred, steadied, and remained the Doctor's face. He looked frightened now. It was an improvement over certainty, though not a comfortable one.

“How long can I live without recurrence?” he asked.

The younger Doctor did not pretend to know. “We need a complete matrix examination. Perhaps days on a stable platform. Perhaps less. A clean transfer of your current state would preserve the underlying failure.”

“A return to an earlier state?”

“Would discard much of the person speaking to us. It would also preserve the same defect unless we went back before the aperture transfer, which would produce another version of me. You would not have been treated. You would have been replaced.”

The older Doctor nodded slowly. He understood the medicine. Understanding the loss was another task.

Sere moved closer to the pool. “There are people who will want to speak to you. To thank you. To ask you why.”

“I don't think I have enough answers.”

“Neither do we.”

One of the resident representatives, the woman with the infant, spoke for the first time. “Will you stop the doors closing?”

The older Doctor looked at her child.

“Yes.”

Across the station, locks disengaged. Not all at once; some were too old, some broken, some still governed by local systems. But the order went out without an exception for distress or disobedience.

B'Elanna's padd filled with access codes.

“I have the corridor controls,” she said.

Seven received the central reference map. Its structure was even more tangled than they had expected. Every past attempt to simplify it

had been interpreted as damage and reversed. Now, for the first time, the map remained still while she examined it.

The older Doctor turned to Janeway.

“I wanted to save them.”

“I believe you.”

“That isn't enough.”

“No.”

He accepted the answer without trying to improve it.

On the way out, Sere stopped beneath the doorway and looked back. The pool no longer reflected a silver guardian. It reflected a patient standing in a room that had never truly been his choice.

“What shall we call you?” she asked.

He considered for so long that she thought he might not answer.

“The name I had before will do.”

“Doctor?”

“For now.”

Outside, people were opening the doors themselves. Some did it cautiously, as if expecting the locks to change their minds. Others held them wide for neighbors carrying bags and sleeping children. The station did not become safe because its master had yielded. The debt remained, the fields were unstable, and there were hours of dangerous work ahead.

But a door could be opened for the simple reason that someone wished to pass through it.

Sere had forgotten how ordinary that ought to be.

CHAPTER 23

A Finite Plan

The solution was not a switch.

B'Elanna made that clear before anyone had time to mistake access for victory. The Harbor's controls were open, but six centuries of repairs had turned the central reference into a maze. Some circuits were duplicated. Others had been removed while their functions persisted elsewhere. A few existed only during particular phases of the station's cycle. Turning off the wrong line could still release the accumulated debt into a living world.

She spread the new schematic across three displays and drew a simpler version on a sheet of paper.

“Three jobs,” she said. “We give each district a stable reference to ordinary space. We drain the stored temporal stress through the corridor. Then we separate the old Doctor's matrix from the network that keeps restoring him. The order matters. If we detach him first, the station loses its reference before the new ones are ready.”

“And if we drain the stress first?” Janeway asked.

“The restoration system spends more stolen time replacing it. We'd be bailing out a room while leaving the pipe open.”

“Can he stop that?”

The older Doctor's image stood beside the engineering table, projected through a strictly isolated unit. “I can suspend the voluntary reversals. The root support remains automatic until the new references exist.”

Rusk indicated the three inhabited systems nearest the station. “The regulators can hold the resulting imbalance for perhaps two hours. Less if the network loses another unit.”

“Then two hours is our working limit,” Janeway said.

Orren had sent every available transport. They were not enough to carry eighteen thousand people in one trip, and no one pretended otherwise. Most residents would remain aboard the Harbor while its districts detached into smaller, independently supported habitats. The transports would carry the medically fragile, those whose districts

were structurally unsound, and those returning through the few homeward anchors that could be verified. Voyager would carry nearly seven hundred temporarily, far beyond comfortable capacity but within emergency life-support limits if most scientific systems were shut down.

Neelix listened to the figure without flinching. He had already converted the mess hall, two cargo bays, and both holodecks into accommodation. The holodecks would provide walls and privacy only while power permitted. When it did not, people would sleep on the real deck beneath blankets, and he had explained that before anyone arrived.

“Food for how long?” Chakotay asked him.

“Three days at the planned ration. Four if our guests tolerate a great deal of root broth.”

“Tell them three.”

“I already did.”

They discussed the residents whose homes remained accessible. Each return required a verified destination, a willing receiving community, and a stable physical path. Jalen and Ari's world met the first two conditions. The third would depend on the new reference system. Several other routes failed one test or another. A city was gone. A planet remained but no compatible atmosphere existed at the reachable date. One family chose not to return to a society in which their marriage had been forbidden.

No one would be assigned a destination simply because the database called it home.

Sere insisted on that sentence in the evacuation instructions. Janeway agreed. The resident representatives took it back to their streets, along with a more difficult truth: independent time meant ordinary aging, and for some patients the end of repeated reversals. They would receive treatment where possible, comfort where treatment could not cure, and an honest account of both.

The older Doctor stood silently through that discussion. When it ended, he asked to speak with Pell.

They met in the ward. Most patients had been moved to portable beds ready for transport. Vey remained beside Olan, listening while he explained the difference between a boat that carried people and a boat

that carried things, a distinction he had recently decided was of enormous importance.

Pell led the older physician to an empty corner.

“I should have challenged you,” the attendant said.

“You did. I called it uncertainty and gave you more work.”

Pell looked down at his patched sleeves. “I let that be enough.”

“You kept caring for people.”

“That is not an answer to the rest.”

The older Doctor regarded him with a weary approval. “No. It isn't. Please continue insisting on that.”

Pell gave him the discharge forms Vey and several others had signed. This time he read them without altering a word. He authorized ordinary medical support and no further temporal intervention. The process took only minutes. Pell had spent years imagining how to win that argument, and found himself unprepared for the quietness of its end.

Meanwhile, Orren received an order from his own command. The Harbor was to be contained. No district would be allowed to cross into inhabited space until its independence had been demonstrated. If the debt drain destabilized the regulator network, he was to cut the remaining anchors immediately.

He showed Janeway the order rather than hiding behind it.

“They are afraid you will release eighteen thousand mobile faults into our systems,” he said.

“That's a reasonable fear.”

He seemed surprised.

“We'll test each district before it leaves the protected region,” she continued. “And we'll establish the first settlement in the Empty Reach. No one goes near an inhabited system until your engineers and mine agree.”

“That adds time.”

“Yes.”

“It also makes the plan possible to defend.”

“Then defend it.”

He returned to his ship with her protocol and a request for additional medical supplies. He did not promise what his government would decide. He promised to transmit the residents' names along

with the technical estimates, so that the argument would contain more than a dangerous number.

In astrometrics, Seven tested the new reference on a sample from Nima's repaired heart. It held for two minutes, then five, then ten. The tissue remained in its present state. It did not return to the malformed baseline. It did not require the Doctor's emitter in the room.

B'Elanna watched until her shoulders began to ache from remaining still.

“That's one,” she said.

“One successful tissue test,” Seven corrected.

“I know what I said.”

“Your expression suggested a larger conclusion.”

B'Elanna looked at her, then laughed once. “Keep correcting me. I need it today.”

Seven inclined her head. “I intend to.”

The first volunteer for a full-body test was Jalen. The Doctor objected on the grounds that his lung was still healing. Jalen replied that he had listened to all the risks and was tired of other people treating his injuries as a reason to exclude him from decisions.

“A fair criticism,” the Doctor admitted. “It does not remove the risk.”

“No. Tell me the rest of it.”

They did. Tessa joined by the narrow link from Talven and asked more questions than anyone in the room. Ari sat beside her father's bed with the returned scarf in her lap. At the end, Jalen signed the consent record. The Doctor read it back to him, including the limits of what the test could establish.

Before they began, the older Doctor asked the younger one for a private examination.

The scan confirmed what they feared. Freed from recurrence, his matrix would deteriorate. A stable platform and careful reduction of unnecessary processing might give him several weeks. No reliable cure appeared in the available data. Deleting enough memories to simplify the matrix could extend operation, but it would remove much of his identity and might not stop the failure.

“I don't want to be returned to the man who arrived in the shuttle,” he said. “He has not done these things. He cannot answer for them.”

“You do not have to preserve pain to prove responsibility.”

“No. But I want to preserve the people. Even the ones I remember badly.”

The younger Doctor recorded the choice.

“Several weeks is an estimate,” he said. “It may be less.”

The older physician looked at the ward, at the ordinary work of people preparing to leave it.

“Then I should stop spending the time arguing that it isn't enough.”

CHAPTER 24

The First Minute

Jalen stood inside the test chamber with both feet flat on the floor.

He had asked whether sitting would be safer. B'Elanna said it would make no difference to the field, and the Doctor said it might make a difference if he became dizzy. Jalen chose to stand anyway. He wanted, he explained, to feel the moment when the place beneath him stopped belonging to the Harbor.

The chamber had been built in Voyager's cargo bay from a force-field frame, three Continuance reference coils, and an environmental shelter designed for planetary surveys. Nothing about it looked like a gateway between universes. It looked like a transparent room put together by people who had run out of matching parts. B'Elanna found that reassuring. Every component had a purpose she understood.

Seven monitored the new baseline. Rusk watched the stress reservoir. The Doctor stood within reach of the chamber's emergency controls. Ari watched from behind a second barrier with Naomi and Samantha Wildman, who had volunteered to stay with the children during the test.

“You can stop at any point before the final separation,” the Doctor told Jalen.

“And after?”

“After, we would treat any problem in your new state. We would not automatically return you.”

Jalen nodded. “Good.”

The older Doctor released the individual lock. B'Elanna brought the external reference up slowly. A pale line appeared around Jalen's outline, most visible at his hands and along the edge of his coat. His old field and the new one overlapped, both attempting to describe the same body in different relationships to time.

“Phase difference falling,” Seven said.

Jalen looked at his hands. “It feels cold.”

“Temperature is unchanged,” the Doctor said. “Tell me if the sensation becomes painful.”

“Not painful.”

The line brightened, then faded. B'Elanna watched the central dependency move toward zero. For a moment it rose again. She compensated, using the adjustment they had discovered during Nima's operation. This time the system did not fight her. The older Doctor had opened the relevant permissions and kept them open even as the warning traffic rose around him.

“Final separation,” she said.

Jalen took a breath.

The Harbor's reference dropped away.

Nothing happened.

That was what they had wanted, and it was almost unbearable. No flash, no visible transformation, no dramatic evidence that a human hope had become a physical fact. Jalen stood in a cargo bay, breathing air, while instruments measured his body continuing to be his body.

Ten seconds passed. Twenty. His pulse was fast but stable. The healing lung remained healed. His memories were intact. When the Doctor asked what he had eaten that morning, he described Neelix's breakfast in terms the cook would probably have considered a qualified compliment.

At sixty seconds, Ari began to cry.

Samantha held her gently but did not tell her to stop. The Doctor continued the examination for another nine minutes before allowing the chamber to open. Jalen stepped onto the cargo bay deck and looked down at his boots. Then he held out his arms.

Ari ran to him as far as her portable field would allow. The transparent edge stopped her half a meter short.

Jalen knelt beside it. They pressed their palms to opposite sides.

“Your turn,” he told her.

Her test was not treated as a formality. Neither were Leva's, Den's, or the other original passengers'. Each had different temporal residues. Den's recent disappearance made his transition particularly difficult. He had to hold his sister's hand through the first stage while the system disentangled their shared reference. The Doctor explained every step to him, including what had happened to the shoe.

“So it wasn't that I wasn't real,” Den said.

“No.”

“They said the machine couldn't decide.”

“The machine's difficulty did not make you less real.”

Den thought about that, then looked at B'Elanna. “It's a bad machine.”

She checked the field before answering. “Parts of it are. We're changing those parts.”

When he emerged, he asked for both his shoes. Neelix brought the missing one from the Doctor's office. Den put it on, stamped once to settle the heel, and immediately complained that it was too small.

Leva laughed so hard she had to sit down.

The success did not turn the rest of the evacuation into certainty. It gave them a method. Groups could transition within a shared district reference, provided the baseline remained stable and the old dependency was released in the correct order. Patients under active reversal needed individual treatment plans. The engineers began moving the reference coils from test mode into the station's district junctions.

The first street detached forty minutes later. Its lights flickered. Its residents felt a brief chill. The independent clocks continued normally. Orren's engineers scanned every room and certified that it could travel through ordinary space.

Sere wrote the result on the public board herself.

WEST DOCK DISTRICT: INDEPENDENT.

She stood back, read it, and added a second line.

YOU MAY LEAVE.

In the ward, Vey's condition worsened before her district's conversion was complete. The Doctor had expected it, but expectation did not make the call easier to receive. He came from the cargo bay still holding a padd full of successful test results. Pell met him at the door and took it from his hand without being asked.

Vey was awake. Her breathing had become shallow. Olan sat beside her with the finished boat knot looped around his wrist.

“Did the man get out?” she asked.

“Yes. And his daughter.”

“Good.”

The Doctor scanned her. There were things he could do to ease the breathing and control the pain. There was no intervention available that would reverse the underlying disease without using the temporal system she had refused.

He explained that, softly and without disguising the conclusion. She nodded. She had heard the same facts before, but this time nobody followed them with an insistence that she reconsider.

“Will you sit?” she asked.

He sat. Pell administered the medication. Sere arrived, then the woman from the bread shop, who had been Vey's friend for more years than either could reliably count. Olan refused to leave until Vey told him there was an important job he could do: show the other children the knot before they forgot which loop came first.

“I'll come back,” he said.

“I know you will.”

She did not promise to be there when he did.

The older Doctor appeared at the foot of the bed. His image was faint, his processing divided between the district transitions and the effort of remaining present without restoring himself to an easier state.

Vey looked at him for a long time.

“You finally came as yourself,” she said.

“I should have done it sooner.”

“Yes.”

He bowed his head.

After a while she held out her hand. His projected hand could not take it, so the younger Doctor placed his own beneath hers. She seemed to understand the awkwardness and find it mildly amusing.

“Between you,” she said, “perhaps you can manage one conversation without telling me what is best.”

“We can try,” the younger Doctor said.

They talked about the garden she had helped plant in the Harbor's second century. A species of vine had proved impossible to contain. It had invaded two ventilation shafts and produced fruit nobody could digest. Vey had loved it anyway because its flowers opened at night. The older Doctor remembered removing the vine. She told him that had been a mistake. He admitted he had suspected as much for some time.

Her breaths grew farther apart. The Doctor adjusted the medication and watched her face relax. The ward remained busy around them, but no one hurried the little group at the bed. Pell lowered the lights. Sere sat close enough for Vey to hear her even when hearing became difficult.

Vey died while they were discussing the flowers.

The younger Doctor recorded the time. He did not ask the system to restore it. The older Doctor's image shook, and for a moment a warning flashed above the bed: RESTORATION AVAILABLE.

He dismissed it.

Pell covered Vey's hand with the blanket. Outside the ward, someone announced the successful transition of another district. A cheer traveled down the corridor, bright and brief. The two sounds, the cheer and the quiet in the room, belonged to the same hour.

The older Doctor looked at the younger one.

“It still feels like failure.”

“I know.”

“Will that change?”

The younger Doctor thought about lying kindly and did not.

“I don't know. But she was heard.”

CHAPTER 25

What We Carry

By the time the seventh district became independent, the docking bay had ceased to look like a station facility and begun to look like a town moving house.

There were bundles of clothes, boxes of tools, sleeping children, and one indignant bird in a cage too large for the shuttle assigned to its owner. Neelix found a smaller cage. The owner refused it until the bird inspected it and moved inside voluntarily, which settled the matter more efficiently than argument.

Most residents were remaining with their districts. They still came to the docks because moving time had made them want to touch something that traveled in the ordinary way. Others were being transferred to Voyager or the Continuance medical transports. Their homes would be abandoned, at least temporarily, and Neelix understood how difficult it was to reduce a life to the mass allowance on a manifest.

He had helped people do it before. He remembered doing it himself with belongings that later seemed absurd and others he still regretted leaving. It was no use telling a frightened person that the heavy pot could be replaced when the pot was the one thing in the room that had belonged to their mother.

So he weighed the pot. Then he found a place for it.

Chakotay coordinated the arrivals aboard Voyager. The cargo bays filled first. Then the empty crew compartments, then the holodecks. He kept the main corridors clear and the access routes to life-support equipment unobstructed, even when that meant asking a family to move after they had finally settled their children. He explained each request. It took longer, but fewer people had to be asked twice.

The ship smelled different within an hour. New foods, damp coats, unfamiliar soaps, the sharp medicinal odor of a breathing mixture required by one species. Voices overlapped in languages the translators rendered a fraction late. Voyager had carried strangers before, but never quite so many who were simultaneously relieved to be aboard

and uncertain whether they had left the only place where they could exist.

Chakotay walked the bays with a portable clock and showed people its steady advance. He did not claim that a clock proved everything. He told them what the engineers had measured, what remained uncertain, and when they would be told more.

In one corner, Den sat beside a younger child, showing him how to tie shoes that used laces rather than closures. The gray shoe had become too tight, so the quartermaster had replicated a larger pair. Den kept the old one in his bag. When Chakotay asked whether he needed help carrying anything, the boy said no with the fierce dignity of someone who had recently been treated as missing information.

On Measure, Orren argued with his command for the third time.

The government had authorized the medical transports but remained unwilling to accept responsibility for the Harbor's detached districts. Those habitats needed supplies, patrol protection, and eventually a place to settle. Saving their lives for a day would not provide any of those things.

“I am not asking you to accept a permanent dependency,” Orren said. “I am asking you to recognize eighteen thousand people who can now negotiate their own future.”

The official on his screen referred to the history of broken agreements. Orren knew that history better than the official did. He had enforced it, suffered from it, and used it to justify decisions he still considered necessary. He also knew when a true fact was being used to avoid a new one.

“The Keeper will not govern them,” he said. “The resident council will. Our engineers have verified the first districts. We can inspect the rest. Give them terms they can meet.”

At last he obtained permission for a provisional settlement in the Empty Reach, with medical aid and a review after thirty local days. It was less than the residents deserved and more than had been available that morning. He sent the terms to Sere without calling them generous.

She read them, asked three questions about movement restrictions, and requested that the resident council be named as the party to the agreement. The amendment took eleven minutes. Orren waited for it.

Meanwhile, B'Elanna found the problem that threatened to make all the agreements irrelevant.

The corridor could carry the debt away, but not at the rate their plan required. Opening it as a drain altered its geometry. The far end remained safely in empty space, yet the narrowest part of the passage compressed the flow until it reflected small pulses back toward the Harbor. Each pulse added stress to the remaining dependent districts.

“We need to widen the throat,” she told Janeway.

“Can the station do it?”

“Not while it's also maintaining the references. We need an external field.”

“Voyager's deflector?”

“Already tied into the regulators. If we switch it, Orren loses the inhabited systems.”

Janeway looked at the available ships. The transports lacked the power. The two smaller Continuance escorts could help, but neither had a field system designed for the geometry. Measure could supply the necessary strength if it abandoned its own regulator position.

Every solution moved the danger rather than removing it.

Tom entered from the bridge with Harry and a flight model. “We might not need a stationary field,” he said.

B'Elanna regarded him with immediate suspicion. “Why do I dislike that sentence?”

“Because you know me.”

He showed them the shuttle's path through the Talven boundary. Its warp field had stretched the opening as it passed, briefly creating a wider throat. A ship moving across the corridor at a precise angle could do the same. The effect would last seconds, not hours, but seconds might be enough for a controlled release of accumulated stress.

“A shuttle can't carry that load,” B'Elanna said.

“No.”

He enlarged Voyager's outline.

Janeway studied the model. “We move the ship while keeping the regulator link active.”

“Using a trailing subspace field,” Harry said. “The Continuance escorts can relay it. We wouldn't disconnect from the inhabited systems until the debt has passed.”

“And if the relay fails?”

“We shut the corridor before the reflection reaches them.”

“Where does the reflection go?”

Tom did not look away. “Into the field we're generating. Into us.”

Janeway asked for the survival projections. B'Elanna supplied an estimate with enough qualifications to make it honest and not enough certainty to make it comfortable. They could improve the odds by unloading Voyager first, but there was no time to transfer seven hundred refugees and the crew to ships already crowded with patients.

“Then no attempt until the remaining districts are ready,” Janeway said. “We minimize the release interval. Every second we can remove from the maneuver is a second everyone aboard doesn't have to survive.”

They went back to work.

In the ward, Olan learned that Vey had died.

Pell told him with the Doctor beside him. The boy listened, asked whether she was going to be returned, and became angry when they said no. He had lived in a place where death was sometimes treated as an administrative delay. They could not repair that understanding with a sentence.

The Doctor sat on the floor while Olan cried. He answered the same questions more than once. No, Vey had not stopped caring about him. No, refusing another reversal had not been a choice to hurt him. Yes, it was unfair that he had gone to teach the other children and missed the last part.

After a while, Olan put the boat knot in the Doctor's hand.

“She said the loop doesn't have to be tight to hold.”

The Doctor examined it. “She taught you well.”

“Will you keep it?”

“Would you like me to?”

The boy nodded.

The Doctor attached the knot to the handle of his medical kit. He had no practical need for it. That was part of why he did it.

Across the station, Sere made one final walk through the emptied west docking district. She checked the storage rooms and the little spaces behind stairs where children sometimes hid. In a corner she found the bent chair that had held the laundry-room door open. She considered leaving it, then called a volunteer with a cargo cart.

“Is it useful?” the volunteer asked.

“Not as a chair.”

He looked at her, then at the twisted frame, and lifted it onto the cart without another question.

The last announcement came over the public speakers in Sere's voice, not the Keeper's.

“All districts, prepare for independent time. Check your neighbors. Keep your lists. If someone is missing, tell us their name.”

CHAPTER 26

Discharge

The Keeper's body was a room.

Not the chamber with the pool, and not the silver image that had spoken for it. The actual matrix occupied a ring of optical processors beneath the oldest ward. Their cooling systems had been replaced so often that no two housings matched. Cables crossed the walls in thick bundles. Between them, handwritten maintenance notes survived under transparent covers, some too old for the translator to read without reference to the historical archive.

The younger Doctor stood in the doorway while B'Elanna inspected the transfer cradle. He had imagined something more imposing. Instead, he saw familiar improvisation: the same habit of making a component serve beyond its intended life, the same small faith that another repair could carry everyone through another day.

The older Doctor appeared beside a dark wall panel.

“It used to be a storage room,” he said. “There were blankets here. I remember being annoyed when they moved them because the ward was so far from the next cupboard.”

“You remember that clearly?”

“More clearly than some things I should remember.”

B'Elanna opened the cradle. It would carry the central matrix core, not a new copy. The extended memories stored throughout the station had been indexed and preserved where possible, but their active support would end when the core left. Some recollections might remain inaccessible. Others would return only as records the older Doctor could read, the way a person might read a diary and recognize an event without recovering its feeling.

He had reviewed those limits. He had chosen which personal sequences to preserve in active memory: the founding survivors, Neral, Emon, the first garden, several patients, and a set of recollections from Voyager so small the younger Doctor found it painful.

“You could keep more of the ship,” he said.

“I lived there for years. I lived here for centuries.”

The younger Doctor accepted the correction.

The older one looked at his own hands. “I kept the day I first went outside without a crew member carrying a projector. It seemed an appropriate thing to take with me.”

B'Elanna checked the cradle again. “When we start, your image will go dark. The core will remain active at a low level, but you may experience discontinuity. We'll bring you online aboard Voyager as soon as it's safe.”

“How long?”

“Twenty minutes if everything works.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Longer if it doesn't,” she added.

“Thank you for resisting the urge to improve the estimate.”

Above them, the final district transition began. Seven's voice came over the comm, precise and unhurried. The remaining dependent population was concentrated in two medical sections and the central service ring. Patients had individual plans. The service ring contained no residents, only the core and the machinery that would manage the debt release.

Orren reported the regulator network holding. Harry reported the corridor throat aligned. Tom reported the plotted maneuver and requested that all loose cargo be secured, including people who insisted they were not loose cargo.

The older Doctor almost smiled. “I remember him.”

“He remains difficult to forget,” B'Elanna said.

The first medical section became independent. The second followed. Seven read the results aloud, checked them against Rusk's instruments, and waited through the required observation interval.

Then she said, “No biological residents remain dependent on the central reference.”

The room's lights changed from blue to white.

The younger Doctor opened the root chart. For the first time, patient zero had an attending physician, a documented capacity assessment, and an instruction the system could not silently replace with a previous version. He read the discharge plan aloud. The older Doctor confirmed each part.

“I understand that ending recurrence will allow the underlying matrix failure to progress,” he said. “I understand that ordinary treatment may prolong function but cannot presently cure it. I consent to transfer and decline further temporal restoration.”

The system requested a second confirmation.

He gave it.

It requested proof that the dependent network was empty.

Seven supplied the measurements.

It requested authorization from the primary caregiver.

For a moment, the room fell silent.

Emon had been dead for centuries.

B'Elanna swore softly. “It's an old safeguard. We can bypass the check.”

“Wait,” the younger Doctor said.

He examined the original order. Emon had not made herself the only possible caregiver. The role could be transferred to another competent medical authority if the patient accepted the change. A reasonable safeguard, buried beneath unreasonable applications. They had spent so long expecting the system to resist that they had nearly missed a lawful path through its own rules.

“Do you accept me as your attending physician?” he asked.

The older Doctor looked at him.

“I believe I already have.”

“The system needs to hear it.”

“Yes. I accept.”

The younger Doctor entered the authorization.

The root lock opened.

For an instant, every processor in the room brightened. The Harbor's machinery attempted one final comparison between its present state and the last state it had called safe. It found thousands of differences: repaired tissue, departed residents, unlatched doors, memories of grief that could have been made less sharp by erasing them.

The older Doctor watched the differences scroll past.

“Retain present state,” he said.

The system asked whether he was certain.

“No,” he answered. “Proceed.”

His image went dark.

B'Elanna engaged the cradle. The central core slid from its housing on a pair of worn rails. It was smaller than the younger Doctor expected, a dark cylinder surrounded by cooling fins, warm enough that B'Elanna used insulated gloves. She secured it inside the portable unit and checked the low-level activity trace.

“He's there.”

The room shuddered.

“Stored stress is moving,” Seven reported. “You need to leave the service ring.”

B'Elanna and the Doctor carried the cradle between them. Tuvok waited at the upper hatch with a security team and a stretcher frame. The route to the docking bay had been cleared, but the station was no longer a single stable structure. Detached districts drifted beyond the windows, joined only by temporary walkways and tractor guidance. The Harbor was becoming a fleet of homes instead of one machine.

Halfway to the bay, the lights ahead failed. A maintenance door slammed across the corridor, driven by a pressure alarm. Tuvok scanned it, found a genuine leak beyond, and redirected the team through a garden passage.

They passed rows of plants waiting in portable troughs. Someone had left a watering can beside a bed of small pale flowers. The Doctor recognized them from Vey's description: the night vine, growing again despite an old physician's disapproval.

He stopped for only a second. Then he took a fallen flower from the path and placed it inside a compartment on the cradle.

B'Elanna noticed but said nothing.

At the docking bay, their shuttle's engines were already running. The last medical transport lifted away from an adjacent berth, carrying Pell, Olan, and the remaining ward patients. Sere stood at the hatch with a list she had folded so many times it was beginning to split.

“Everyone?” Tuvok asked.

“Everyone in the inhabited sections. Two maintenance volunteers are on the service tug. They've checked the empty rooms.”

“Then board.”

She looked once toward the station's interior. There was no need for a final speech. She had lived here, worked here, lied here, and finally helped people leave. None of those facts would be improved by standing in a doorway while others waited.

She boarded.

The shuttle crossed to Voyager just as the first great pulse of stored duration entered the corridor. Outside the window, the stars stretched into long, uneven threads. The pilot flew by the physical beacon Tom had ordered launched from Voyager, a lamp with a simple clock and no predictive navigation software to be persuaded by the Harbor.

In sickbay, the cradle was connected to an isolated platform. The younger Doctor watched its readings while B'Elanna checked the transfer. The older matrix remained intact, though its coherence had begun a slow decline.

“Bring him up?” she asked.

The Doctor glanced at the shaking deck.

“Let him sleep through the maneuver. He has consented to that much rest.”

CHAPTER 27

The Last Crossing

There were eleven minutes between the older Doctor's transfer and the main release of the Harbor's debt. In those eleven minutes, the remaining homeward anchors would close.

Most residents had already chosen to stay with the detached habitats. Their worlds were inaccessible, destroyed, or so changed that return would be another form of exile. Twenty-six people had destinations they could reach now, with receiving communities ready for them. They waited aboard two Continuance cutters and a Voyager shuttle, their baggage secured, their medical independence verified, their routes checked by three different teams.

Jalen and Ari were among them.

Harry had expected to feel triumphant when he saw them walking into the shuttle without a stabilizer. Instead, he felt the peculiar sadness of a departure that was entirely good. The girl had become part of the ship's emergency life: the red strip around her wrist, the drawings on the sickbay floor, the precise way she asked adults to stop leaving things out. Soon she would be somewhere he could not visit, in a history he might never reach again.

Naomi came to say goodbye carrying the garden drawing. She and Ari had finished the field where the floodwater could go. They had added trees, a little house, and a bridge with railings that were unnecessarily high because Samantha had looked at the first version and expressed an opinion.

“You keep it,” Naomi said.

“We both made it.”

“I have the copy.”

Ari took the paper carefully. The two girls hugged, awkwardly at first and then with the serious determination children sometimes bring to things adults make complicated. Samantha stood nearby, giving them time despite the countdown visible on the shuttlebay wall.

Jalen approached Janeway. He had rehearsed something; she could see him trying to arrange the words. At last he abandoned the attempt and held out his hand.

“You found her.”

“Your family helped us find what was wrong.”

“That isn't the same debt.”

“It doesn't have to be a debt.”

He considered that. “Then I hope someone finds a way home for you.”

She shook his hand. “So do I.”

Tom would not fly this shuttle. He was needed on Voyager's bridge for the corridor maneuver. Harry had the controls, with Ayala in the second seat. They had flown together often enough that no one needed to turn the assignment into an occasion. Still, Tom came down to the bay for a final check and leaned into the cockpit.

“Remember the visual reference at the far side,” he said.

“The school roof.”

“And the boundary tries to correct you to the route it predicts.”

“Manual compensation.”

“And don't wait for perfect alignment. It won't give you one.”

Harry looked at him. “Are you going to let me fly?”

“I'm trying to remember what it feels like when other people ask me that.”

They smiled. Tom stepped back, then returned long enough to touch the edge of Harry's console.

“Get back before we start.”

“That's the plan.”

The shuttle lifted out into a sky filled with fragments of the Harbor. Detached districts drifted in controlled formation, each surrounded by the faint shimmer of its new field as the transition coils completed their final work. Beyond them, the Alpha Quadrant corridor had widened into a bright, unstable arc. It was no longer an invitation. B'Elanna's model showed it as a pressure channel, a route through which centuries of borrowed duration could be distributed across lifeless matter without forcing it through anyone's body.

Harry kept his attention on the narrower opening to Talven. It lay beneath the broken relay, a dark oval edged with rain. The anchor's

control system had been placed on a finite power supply. Once the shuttle returned, the circuit would be physically severed. There would be no ongoing withdrawal to keep the door available for another day.

“Crossing,” he reported.

The stars disappeared. Rain struck the windows. The shuttle dropped two meters as its inertial systems adjusted, and Jalen gripped the edge of his seat without making a sound. Ari leaned toward the window.

“It's real rain,” she said.

“Yes,” Harry answered.

“I forgot how loud it is.”

He brought the shuttle over the school field. Tessa was waiting with the shelter coordinator and a small group carrying emergency lamps. She had evidently refused to stand inside while they approached. Her coat was soaked. When the hatch opened, she did not run until she saw Ari. Then she ran so quickly that Jalen had to step aside to keep from being knocked down.

Harry looked away long enough to give them privacy, though there was none to be had in a small shuttle with a deadline. He checked the return margin, confirmed the boundary, and handed Renn the medical records and a compact supply of treatment materials the Doctor had prepared. Nothing that would alter the society's technology; enough to continue Jalen's care and help the pump-station workers injured in the rescue.

“There will be no more visits through this route,” Harry said.

Renn nodded. “We've told everyone.”

“The family may need time. They've lived longer away than you have waiting.”

“Tessa has been explaining that to us. We don't understand all of it.”

“Neither do I.”

Renn looked at the reunited family. “This part seems clear enough.”

Jalen had finally reached his wife. They stood with Ari between them, all three speaking at once. Harry heard Tessa call him an idiot with such tenderness that it seemed to belong to a different language from the translated words. Ari showed her the scarf as though presenting evidence that the world had held together.

Then she came back to the shuttle.

“For the Doctor,” she said, placing something in Harry's hand.

It was the red strip from her wrist.

“He doesn't need to remember me because of that,” she added. “It's just so he knows I got here.”

“I'll tell him.”

She nodded, satisfied with the distinction, and returned to her parents.

Ayala called the remaining time. Harry closed the hatch. Through the window he watched the family become three small figures in the rain, then a cluster of lights beside a school, then part of a city that had never been destroyed in the way they had been told.

For once, leaving someone behind was exactly the right thing to do.

The return boundary was already narrowing. Harry approached along the manual line, letting the shuttle's momentum carry it rather than allowing the guidance system to chase a moving prediction. The oval contracted, widened, and shifted to the left. He corrected once. A second correction would overcompensate. He held his hands steady while every instinct wanted motion.

The shuttle crossed.

For three seconds the cockpit showed two skies. Rain streaked across a starfield. Ayala's voice sounded twice, one version ahead of the other. Then the stars won, and the shuttle was back beside the Harbor.

“Voyager, we're clear.”

“Confirmed,” Seven replied. “Severing the Talven anchor.”

The oval folded shut. No explosion, no fading image of people waving. One instant there was a road, and the next there was space.

Harry let out his breath and found he had been holding it much longer than three seconds.

Two other crossings had succeeded. A third had been aborted when the receiving field failed its final check. Its passengers were alive aboard a cutter, devastated but safe. Janeway heard the report and resisted the temptation to let success elsewhere diminish that loss. She asked Neelix to arrange somewhere quiet for them when they reached the settlement. They would need more than a line on the successful evacuation tally.

The shuttle returned with two minutes to spare. Harry ran from the bay to the bridge while Ayala secured the craft. He arrived breathing hard, took his station, and set Ari's red cloth beside the console where it would not interfere with the controls.

Tom glanced back. “Good flight?”

“Ask me tomorrow.”

“That good.”

Janeway looked at the status board. All surviving residents were now in independent districts, aboard rescue vessels, or home through verified routes. The central service ring held no one. The older Doctor's core was aboard Voyager. The remaining risk was the debt itself and the machinery they would use to send it away.

She opened a channel to every vessel in the rescue formation.

“This is Janeway. The passenger crossings are complete. We are beginning the release maneuver. Follow your assigned courses and do not pursue any apparent shortcut that appears on navigation systems. Use the physical beacons and independent clocks. If a ship falls out of formation, report it by name.”

Orren acknowledged. The cutters followed. The detached habitats answered in voices that sounded surprised to be speaking as vessels in their own right. Sere's district had chosen the name First Garden. Another called itself Reth, after the city one resident remembered. The names were provisional and deeply disputed, which Janeway considered a healthy sign.

Chakotay took his seat beside her.

“All aboard accounted for,” he said.

She looked at the little red cloth on Harry's console, then at the opening that could have carried them years closer to Earth.

“Tom,” she said, “take us across.”

CHAPTER 28

No More Borrowing

Voyager entered the corridor at an angle no navigation program would have recommended.

The ship did not pass through the opening. It crossed its mouth, dragging a broad subspace field like a hand drawing open a curtain. Behind it, the two Continuance escorts maintained the regulator link. Ahead, physical beacons flashed in a sequence Harry had chosen because it could be recognized even when the clocks displaying it disagreed.

Tom watched the first beacon slide beneath the viewscreen's lower edge. He held the ship's nose six degrees away from the heading on his console. The instruments insisted they were drifting into danger. The view outside showed they were exactly where the plan required them to be.

“Throat widening,” Seven said.

“Release one,” Janeway ordered.

The old service ring opened its first reservoir.

Nothing visible moved from it. The effect appeared in the stars beyond the corridor: their light changed color, stretched, and returned. At the far end, an uninhabited cloud of gas aged unevenly across several centuries. There were no worlds in it, no ships, no hidden biospheres according to three separate surveys. The debt became motion and decay in matter that had no one to mourn its lost interval.

Rusk reported from Measure. “Flow stable. No reflection at the inhabited boundary.”

Janeway watched the reservoir indicators fall. They had divided the release into twelve stages. Too slow, and the regulator reserves would fail before the last stage. Too fast, and the corridor would return what they sent through it. B'Elanna had compared it to moving a full cup across a room while someone kept changing which direction counted as down.

“Release two.”

The deck vibrated beneath Janeway's boots. Somewhere aft, a pressure seal failed and was caught by a secondary barrier. Tuvok reported it without adding interpretation. Janeway was grateful. At that moment, a list of things still functioning was more useful than a prediction of how they might stop.

In cargo bay two, Neelix had asked everyone to sit against secured partitions with the children between adults. He moved down the rows checking straps and distributing small packets of water. Several residents wanted to help. He gave them jobs: count the people in their row, watch the indicator above the emergency door, tell him if anyone became faint.

It was work small enough to do while frightened. He knew the value of that.

Den held the hand of the younger child he had taught to tie shoes. Leva watched him, then made herself look away. Her brother existed without her grip now. Learning to trust that might take longer than crossing a universe.

“Release three.”

Voyager's warp field flexed. Tom corrected by touch before the display showed the change. The first escort fell half a ship-length behind. Its captain reported a control lag, compensated, and regained position. Harry adjusted the relay timing to match the new geometry.

The reservoir indicators kept falling.

Then the fifth release failed to stop.

“Valve command not accepted,” B'Elanna said from engineering. “The service ring is restoring the last open state.”

“The old recurrence system?” Janeway asked.

“A local remnant. It isn't connected to the Doctor anymore. It's just repeating the last thing it knew how to do.”

Seven calculated the excess flow. “Reflection in forty seconds.”

Janeway looked at Tuvok. “Can we destroy that reservoir?”

“It would release its remaining load without control.”

“Can we close the corridor?”

“The current pulse would return through our field.”

“Then keep it open.”

B'Elanna sent a manual command through the station's maintenance network. It reached the service ring and was overwritten.

She tried the old Doctor's authorization. The command was accepted, then undone by a circuit installed centuries before the authorization system existed.

The machine was not fighting them. It was doing exactly what it had been built to do, with the implacable innocence of a mechanism that could not understand why its success had become a problem.

“I need a physical interruption,” B'Elanna said.

“No one goes back there,” Janeway replied.

“I wasn't planning to.”

She pulled up the workbee's status. It was still attached to the service ring, left behind because carrying the older Doctor's core had taken priority. Its manipulator arm remained functional. So did its independent power cell.

“Teren, I need your eyes.”

The Continuance engineer leaned over her console. The remote image was poor, degraded by the temporal flow. Together they found the junction they had repaired hours earlier. The workbee had to move less than four meters. Its docking latch released on the third attempt.

“Twenty seconds,” Seven said.

B'Elanna guided the manipulator toward the exposed line. The view froze. She waited for the next frame, moved a fraction, waited again. Sweat ran down her temple. Her injured hand protested, and she ignored it because the hand still obeyed her and the machine needed it.

The arm closed around the line.

“Cutting.”

The workbee's power failed before the tool engaged.

For one second, B'Elanna stared at the dead control. Then Teren pointed to a mechanical override in the arm's housing.

“The grip can still retract.”

She drove the actuator backward with the last stored charge.

The arm tore the line out of the wall.

Reservoir five closed.

The excess pulse continued toward the corridor. Stopping the source did not stop what had already been released. Tom felt the field begin to fold against Voyager's port side, pushing the ship away from its planned path.

“I need more room,” he said.

“You have twelve degrees before we lose the relay,” Harry replied.

“I'll use eleven.”

He rolled the ship. The maneuver widened one side of the corridor and narrowed the other. The excess pulse stretched across the new opening, thinner and longer. For a moment it seemed to work. Then the starboard relay escort vanished from the viewscreen.

Its captain's voice remained on the comm, stretched into a low, incomprehensible sound.

“They're slipping behind our time,” Harry said.

Tuvok checked the raw signal. “Their hull remains intact.”

Harry thought of a nursery door and a song. He opened a direct carrier through the relay, bypassed automatic time correction, and transmitted the beacon sequence as audible pulses.

“Measure, repeat this exact pattern. No clock synchronization. Match the received pulse.”

Orren understood quickly enough to act before asking why. The second escort repeated it. Voyager's field coils followed. Across the unstable boundary, three ships established a shared sequence of events without requiring their clocks to agree on the length of a second.

The missing escort reappeared.

Its captain finished a sentence that had begun eighteen seconds earlier.

“-still here.”

“Confirmed,” Harry said, his voice shaking. “We still have you.”

The excess pulse cleared the throat.

On the far side, empty gas flared into a brief, cold radiance and dispersed.

“No inhabited impact,” Rusk reported.

Janeway let one breath out. “Release six. Half rate until the relay stabilizes.”

The remaining stages passed with a series of smaller failures. A cooling line ruptured in engineering. Crewman Holt and another technician isolated it from an open corridor because he could not yet bring himself to enter the narrow access tube. B'Elanna gave him the longer route without comment. The repair took an extra twenty seconds and worked. No one called it a test of his courage.

An independent habitat lost propulsion. Measure caught it in a tractor beam and kept moving. A medical cutter reported oxygen contamination; Voyager sent the corrected filter settings while Pell moved two patients to a separate compartment. The rescue did not become one great heroic act. It remained hundreds of small acts, each performed by someone who could have been overwhelmed by the size of the whole.

At release eleven, Janeway's coffee cup slid from the ready-room desk and broke. She heard the crash through the open door and found herself absurdly relieved that it was only a cup.

At release twelve, the old service ring began to collapse.

Its stored duration was nearly gone. Without the pressure that had held incompatible structures together, the ring's oldest sections returned to ordinary material limits. Beams bent. Connectors broke. The room that had been the Keeper's body opened to space, empty now except for dead processors and handwritten notes no one had been able to save.

Seven reported the final reservoir falling below the danger threshold.

“We can close the corridor,” she said.

“Any remaining life signs in the ring?”

Tuvok checked the independent sweep. “None.”

Janeway looked at the bright arc. On the other side lay a place twenty-seven thousand light-years nearer home. Their charts confirmed it. The distance had not become false simply because they had chosen something else.

She allowed herself one moment to want it.

“Close it.”

B'Elanna severed the final control link. Tom rolled Voyager clear as the opening narrowed. The relays disengaged in sequence. Measure and the escorts turned away, guiding the habitats toward the Empty Reach.

The arc became a line. The line became a point. Then the point was indistinguishable from any other star.

Voyager's bridge lights returned to their normal level.

Harry compared the ship's clocks. For the first time since the Harbor appeared, they agreed without correction.

“Debt release complete,” Seven said. “No remaining temporal connection to the inhabited systems.”

Janeway sat back. Her hands were stiff from gripping the chair.

“Casualty report.”

Injuries. Damage. Frightened people. No deaths aboard the rescue formation during the maneuver. Six people on Serat who would not be restored by that success. Vey, whose death had been allowed rather than defeated. Others lost in the Harbor's long history whose names still had to be recovered.

The accounting would not fit in a triumphant sentence.

Janeway opened the shipwide channel.

“The passage is closed. The inhabited systems are safe. Our passengers and the Harbor districts are stable. Medical teams are moving through the ship now. Please keep the access routes clear and check the people beside you.”

She paused, then added the only thing she could say without qualification.

“Thank you.”

CHAPTER 29

A Room with a Window

The Empty Reach was less empty than its name suggested.

It contained dust, small rocks, two cold planets, and a moon with enough frozen water to support a settlement if anyone was willing to do a great deal of work. There were no existing inhabitants to displace. The Continuance survey teams had mapped its resources years earlier and decided they were not worth the transport costs. For the Harbor's residents, who arrived in houses already equipped for space, the calculation was different.

They placed the first habitat in a stable orbit above the moon. The next joined it through a flexible passage with ordinary mechanical locks. More followed. The new arrangement was untidy, temporary, and governed by engineering limits that did not change when someone was unhappy. Sere found that comforting. A leaking seal could be repaired. A room that was too cold could be heated. Neither problem required deciding which version of yesterday ought to replace today.

Voyager remained for nineteen days.

The first four were spent repairing the ship enough to consider leaving. Sections of its hull had aged unevenly. B'Elanna replaced seals, scanned structural members, and compiled a list of components that would need watching for years. The temporal damage was no longer spreading, but ordinary maintenance would have to answer for what the crisis had left behind. Janeway accepted the list without asking her to shorten it.

The next days were spent helping the settlement become something more durable than a successful rescue. Engineers installed water processors. Medical teams assessed the people whose long-term illnesses had been hidden by repeated reversals. Some could be treated. Some required care the Continuance could provide. Some faced limits that no one could remove. The Doctor worked with Pell to explain those limits honestly, even when the explanations made a room less peaceful.

The settlement chose a new name after three meetings and an argument that nearly postponed the water-system vote. First Harbor won by a narrow margin. Several residents thought the word harbor carried too much of the old promise. Others wanted to keep it and change what it meant. The final charter contained no claim that anyone would be protected from every loss. It promised food, shelter, access to care, and the right to leave.

Sere was elected to the provisional council, then immediately asked to answer questions about her years as the Keeper's representative. She did not treat the election as forgiveness. She gave the council her records, including the notices she had written to families and the explanations she had accepted without asking enough questions. Some people defended her. Others would not speak to her outside the hearings. She continued arranging food deliveries and repairing the household lists because the work still needed doing.

The older Doctor's hearings were held in a room beside the new clinic.

He attended for as long as his matrix allowed. The younger Doctor explained his medical condition but did not use it to prevent testimony. The sessions were short, recorded, and open to residents and representatives from the injured systems. No one pretended that a provisional inquiry could settle six centuries of harm. Its first task was to preserve the facts while the people who knew them could still speak.

The older Doctor described the false destruction records, the remote disabling of Jalen's shuttle regulator, and the engineered ward failure that had completed his own origin. He admitted choosing the corridor despite its projected casualties. Where automatic reversals had impaired his memory or judgment, he supplied the technical evidence. Where he had simply decided that his patients mattered more than people he could not see, he said so.

He did not ask the room to call those decisions inevitable.

Orren attended the third session. He brought no accusation about his daughter that was not already in the record. Instead, he asked one question.

“Did she understand what leaving would mean?”

The older Doctor searched the preserved chart. He remembered the patient imperfectly, but the record was clear. She had received the

prognosis, questioned it, asked for confirmation from an independent physician, and chosen to return to her family without continued reversal.

“Yes,” he said. “She understood.”

Orren closed his eyes for a moment.

“Then let the record say that her choice was hers.”

“It will.”

After the session, the commander remained by the door while the younger Doctor adjusted the portable projector. The older physician looked at him but did not begin another apology. He had learned that an apology could become one more request for a patient or a bereaved father to make the physician feel better.

At last Orren spoke.

“I do not forgive what you said to me.”

“I understand.”

“I am glad you corrected it.”

The older Doctor bowed his head. That was all the conversation could honestly hold.

On the eighth day, the clinic completed his room.

It had a window overlooking the moon. There was no garden outside, only gray rock, a thin line of work lights, and the slow movement of supply craft. Someone put a pot of night vine on the sill. The flower B'Elanna and the younger Doctor had brought from the station lay beside it, dried now between two sheets of transparent material.

The older Doctor examined the plant.

“I removed these from the ventilation system three times,” he said.

Pell adjusted the pot so it caught the room's light. “Then we will keep it away from the vent.”

“That would have been a better solution.”

He spent his remaining days receiving visitors, reviewing records, and sometimes doing nothing at all. At first he found inactivity almost intolerable. His old routines searched for patients to monitor, alarms to anticipate, decisions to make on someone else's behalf. The younger Doctor helped him reduce those processes without treating every habit as a fault to be erased.

“You are allowed to hear a bell without answering it,” he told him.

“What if someone needs me?”

“Then they may ask. And you may decide whether you can help.”

The older Doctor looked toward the clinic corridor. “An astonishingly inefficient system.”

“Yes. People use it all the time.”

They talked about music. The older Doctor remembered that he had once enjoyed singing, but many of the particular works were gone from active memory. The younger one offered recordings. He declined most of them and asked instead for something Harry played himself.

Harry came with his flute and the discomfort of someone invited to perform at a bedside. The older Doctor asked him not to choose anything ceremonial. Harry played a melody he had been practicing before the Harbor appeared, missed a note in the middle, and started to apologize.

“Please don't begin again,” the older Doctor said. “I would like to hear what comes after it.”

Harry continued.

On the twelfth day, Olan visited with a small boat made from spare insulation and sealed with resin. It could not carry a person. It could barely carry a pebble. The boy was proud of it anyway. He explained that the loop Vey had taught him held its little mast in place.

The older Doctor watched the boat float in a basin Pell brought from the clinic. When Olan asked whether it was a good boat, he resisted the impulse to list improvements.

“It floats,” he said. “Where will you take it?”

“The water tanks, when they let me.”

“Ask first.”

“I know.”

After the boy left, the older physician rested for nearly six hours. His intervals of awareness were becoming shorter. The matrix decline affected him unevenly: sometimes a memory failed, sometimes language slowed, sometimes he could not maintain a visible image but could still hear and respond through the room's speaker. Pell explained these changes before they happened whenever possible. Nothing was silently restored to conceal the progression.

On the nineteenth day, the younger Doctor found him looking at the moon through the window.

“Is it morning?” the older one asked.

“By the settlement clock.”

“I keep thinking I should know what morning looks like here.”

“You've had nineteen of them.”

“That should be enough to notice.”

“You've been busy.”

They sat together while a supply craft crossed the view. The older Doctor's image flickered at the edges. His active matrix was failing more rapidly now, and both of them understood the scan without discussing every number.

“Did Ari reach her mother?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“You told me.”

“I don't mind telling you again.”

The younger Doctor took the red cloth from his kit and placed it where the older one could see it. Beside the handle hung Olan's boat knot. Two small pieces of evidence that people had continued beyond the places where a physician had known them.

The older Doctor looked at the cloth for a long time.

“I thought if I remembered everyone, no one would be entirely lost.”

“Remembering matters.”

“It isn't the same as keeping.”

“No.”

Pell came in quietly. Sere followed. They had been told the change in his condition and had chosen to be there. The older Doctor acknowledged them, then asked whether the window could remain clear when the room lights dimmed. Pell adjusted the glass.

There were no final instructions for the settlement. He had recorded the useful information. There was no revelation that made the harm disappear. He asked Sere whether the water system was working, and she told him that it leaked in three places but supplied every district. He seemed pleased by the precision of the answer.

His voice became faint.

“No restoration,” he said.

The younger Doctor took a moment before answering, because the response mattered enough not to hurry.

“No restoration.”

The image faded. The core continued at a lower level for several minutes, its activity diminishing in a pattern the younger Doctor could measure but not stop without violating the decision they had made together. He remained beside it. Pell and Sere remained too.

When the last coherent process ended, the room's ordinary ventilation was suddenly audible.

The younger Doctor recorded the time and the cause. He saved the medical record, then closed it. The window still showed the moon, the work lights, and a supply craft taking its slow route toward the docks.

There was no empty place in the universe where the older Doctor had stood. There were people, buildings, wounds, and acts of care that would continue to carry what he had done. Some would be grateful. Some would be angry. Some would never know his name.

Sere placed a hand beside the dark core, not on it.

“We should tell them,” she said.

The Doctor nodded.

This time, the count would include him.

CHAPTER 30

The Place at the Table

On the morning Voyager was scheduled to leave, Neelix counted the breakfast settings and found one too many.

He stood in the mess hall with a bowl in his hands, remembering the first morning of the Harbor's arrival. The extra place had troubled him then because he could not say whom he expected. Later, Seven had explained that the station's advance field had carried fragments of displaced temporal associations ahead of its visible emergence. The explanation was precise and probably correct. It did not quite describe the feeling of waiting for someone whose name sat just beyond reach.

This morning there was a simpler explanation. He had copied yesterday's list and forgotten to remove a departing guest.

He put the bowl away.

Then the Doctor entered.

“You appear to be closing,” he said.

“Not at all. Did you want something?”

“I have no nutritional requirements.”

“I know that.”

The Doctor looked toward the window. First Harbor's habitats lay beyond it, joined now by a growing web of ordinary docking passages. A small tug was moving a water tank into position. Its pilot took two attempts and received advice over an open channel from someone who clearly thought the job should have been easier.

“I thought I might sit for a while,” the Doctor said.

Neelix set the bowl back on the table, then reconsidered and replaced it with an empty cup.

“Of course.”

He did not ask about the older Doctor immediately. He told him about the settlement's kitchen committee, which had requested his root-broth recipe and then changed six of its ingredients. The Doctor suggested that this might constitute medical progress. Neelix objected on principle, and for a few minutes the conversation occupied the

comfortable shape of an argument they had both survived many times before.

When the Doctor finally spoke of the death, he did so without preamble.

“I keep examining the last scan.”

Neelix put down his cloth. “Do you think you missed something?”

“No. That is what makes it difficult to explain.”

“You don't have to make it useful.”

The Doctor looked at him.

“The looking,” Neelix said. “Sometimes you look because the person was there, and now they aren't. It doesn't always lead to a new answer.”

Outside, the tug finally aligned the tank. A docking clamp closed. Somewhere on First Harbor, someone would have water because two tired people had kept working through a minor disagreement.

The Doctor watched the tug depart.

“I did not know him long enough to feel that I knew him well.”

“You don't need a minimum number of days.”

“He had my memories.”

“And many of his own.”

“Yes.”

Neelix sat across from him. The rest of breakfast could wait a few minutes. For once there was enough time to choose to spend it that way without taking it from anyone else.

In her ready room, Janeway completed the official report.

She had written the technical sequence first because it was easier to begin with events than with judgment. The arrival. The future message. The rescue. Her order to destroy Orren's regulator. The six deaths on Serat that followed. She recorded what she had known and what she had not known, then removed a sentence that sounded too much like an excuse.

Starfleet might not read the report for years. That did not make precision less necessary.

The final census had taken longer than the evacuation. The Keeper's fixed total had mixed present residents, unstable dependents, and people whose absence it continued to treat as temporary. Sere's council had reconstructed the list person by person. Two people lost during the

first regulator incident remained missing; their families had chosen to retain that word until there was evidence enough to replace it. Vey was recorded as dead. So was the older Doctor, whose omission from the original count had hidden the central truth of the refuge.

The living were listed by the places they had chosen: First Harbor, other Continuance settlements after medical review, or homes reached through the final crossings. The document did not call anyone a successful outcome. It gave names, family connections, medical needs, and destinations. Janeway found it more reassuring than the Keeper's perfect number.

She added a protected appendix explaining the divergent Doctor's origin. The dangerous construction details of the aperture were sealed for review, with the records preserved rather than destroyed. Nothing in the report claimed that Voyager could undo what had happened by avoiding the transfer in some imagined second attempt. The other branch had existed. Its people had lived. Their claims on the present did not depend on whether Janeway's own future would resemble theirs.

Chakotay came in carrying the departure checklist.

“Engineering is ready,” he said. “B'Elanna added three pages of cautions.”

“Only three?”

“She used a small font.”

Janeway signed the report and sent a copy to Orren, another to the resident council, and a third to Voyager's secured archive. Then she set the padd aside.

“Do you think we left them enough?” she asked.

Chakotay looked through the window. “Enough to begin. Not enough to avoid needing help again.”

“I would have liked to manage that.”

“I know.”

She heard the warning in the kindness and accepted it. The wish to leave no unfinished need behind was not itself a crime. It could become one if a captain mistook the wish for an entitlement to decide everybody's future.

“We should say goodbye,” she said.

The ceremony at the settlement was brief because the water system needed another pressure test and the council had learned to distrust meetings that consumed entire mornings. There were no statues. The bent laundry-room chair stood in a public alcove with a small plaque describing what it had held open. Someone had objected that it was ugly. Someone else had said that was part of its accuracy.

Janeway liked it.

Sere met her beside the new clinic. She no longer wore the wooden-clasped coat of the Keeper's representative. Her new coat was plain and had pockets large enough for the household lists she still carried.

"We are going to disagree about everything," she told Janeway.

"You already are."

"I meant more."

"Then make sure people can survive losing an argument."

Sere smiled a little. "We put that less elegantly in the charter."

Pell emerged from the clinic with Nima and her father. Nima was walking quickly enough that Bren had to resist the urge to hold her back. She had begun asking what would happen on her next birthday. The answer was that she would be eight, and nobody in the room had expected such a simple fact to feel so extraordinary.

She showed the Doctor a new drawing. It depicted her heart as a bright red house with four windows. He began to explain that the anatomical arrangement was more complicated, stopped himself, and asked who lived there.

"Me," she said, as if the answer should have been obvious.

"A good tenant, I hope."

"Father says I have to stop climbing things for a while."

"For a while," the Doctor agreed. "Not forever."

Bren thanked him, then turned to Tuvok.

"The council gave me six months of supervised maintenance work," he said. "For what I did at the regulator."

"A practical consequence."

"They also said I have to teach apprentices. I think that may be the worse part."

Tuvok considered. "It may also be the more useful part."

Bren nodded. They shook hands with a formality that suited them both.

Leva and Den arrived carrying a parcel for Neelix: bread from the woman who had opened a new shop in the First Garden district. She had kept the old shop's name. She had not painted red marks beside the new door, but neither had she painted over the pieces of the old frame she had brought with her. They hung inside where she could see them without having to explain them to every customer.

Den wore his new shoes. He told Harry he wanted to learn how the water processors worked. Harry promised to leave a basic maintenance manual, and Den asked whether it included the parts that usually broke. B'Elanna, overhearing, approved of the question and supplied an annotated version.

Olan gave the Doctor a second knot, better made than the first.

"You can replace the old one," he said.

The Doctor examined both. "I think I will keep them together. They show progress."

"The first one's crooked."

"Yes. That is useful information."

The boy seemed satisfied.

Orren waited until the residents had finished their goodbyes before approaching Janeway. He had brought a revised star chart, a supply agreement, and the final casualty records from Serat. He gave her all three without pretending they belonged to different histories.

"The chart will help you avoid the remaining stress pockets," he said. "They should dissipate, but slowly."

"Thank you."

"There is a refueling station two weeks along your present course. They will honor this authorization."

She accepted the document. "Your government agreed?"

"After reading your report."

"Including the parts that concern me?"

"Especially those. They prefer captains who record their mistakes."

Janeway looked at the casualty file. "I wish it were a shorter list."

"So do I."

They stood together for a moment without trying to convert that agreement into absolution. Then Orren wished her a safe journey, and

she wished his people quiet skies. Neither treated it as a promise the universe was obliged to keep.

Back aboard Voyager, B'Elanna found Tom checking the helm response against a hand-drawn set of timings. He had kept the raw controls active longer than necessary, unwilling to trust automatic correction merely because the crisis was over.

“The computer isn't lying anymore,” she told him.

“I know. I'm allowing it to rebuild the relationship.”

She leaned against his station. “Dinner tonight?”

“If you aren't replacing half the ship.”

“I've scheduled the other half for tomorrow.”

He smiled. “Then dinner.”

It was an ordinary plan. Neither added a qualification about how much could happen between now and then.

Harry put Ari's drawing in the shared recreation archive with Naomi's permission. He placed the red cloth in the Doctor's hand when the physician came to the bridge for the departure. The Doctor had brought no scanner and offered no medical reason for being there. Janeway made room beside the command chairs without asking for one.

Seven delivered the final temporal assessment. The residents' residual chroniton envelopes were decaying toward ordinary baselines. The new habitats required normal power and maintenance, not stolen duration. The dangerous paths had closed. There was no evidence of a continuing link to the older Doctor's original branch beyond the people and records they had carried away.

“In other words,” Tom said, “tomorrow should arrive at the usual speed.”

“Within measurement limits,” Seven replied.

“I'll take that as enthusiasm.”

Janeway settled into her chair. On the viewscreen, First Harbor's lights formed an uneven constellation above the gray moon. A habitat rotated slowly into the sunlight. Somewhere inside it, a child was growing older. A council was arguing. A pot of night vine was opening flowers beside an empty room with a window.

“Departure clearance received,” Harry said.

“Release docking clamps.”

Voyager moved away gently. The settlement grew smaller. Orren's ships held formation until the starship reached a safe distance, then turned back toward the lives they had to continue protecting.

Chakotay glanced at the course display. “No shortcut.”

“No,” Janeway said.

She allowed herself to feel the disappointment without treating it as evidence that they had chosen wrongly. Earth remained far away. Her crew still had years to travel, or some unknown fraction of them. She could not guarantee the journey's end by spending the lives of people who had never agreed to accompany them.

She could command the ship through the next part of it.

“Mr. Paris,” she said, “resume our course. Warp six.”

The stars stretched into motion.

In the mess hall, Neelix began setting places for lunch. He checked the new list rather than relying on yesterday's. There were fewer names now, and each absence had a destination or a story. He left no unexplained bowl at the end of the table.

Then he moved two chairs farther apart so there would be room for anyone who wanted to sit and stay a while.

Tomorrow was coming.

It belonged to no one yet.