

Two in One

A Story of the USS Kitty Hawk, NCC-1669 — Stardate 2282.047 — Kelvin Timeline

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CHAPTER ONE: THE EXPERIMENT

The quantum filament had been tailing the Kitty Hawk for seventy-two hours like an unwanted stray, drifting through the outer rim of the Tycho expanse and trailing its peculiar subspace wake across three star systems. It was, Commander T'Vrak had noted in his log with characteristic understatement, *anomalous*. The filament was a class-7 structure — known, catalogued, unremarkable in most respects — except that its resonance signature was oscillating at a frequency no recorded filament had ever produced. Something inside it was different. T'Vrak intended to find out what.

The science lab on Deck Seven had been reconfigured over the preceding twenty-four hours to house a quantum resonance containment matrix — a cage, essentially, built from interlocked field emitters designed to capture a controlled sample of the filament's exotic subspace energy without allowing it to interact with shipboard systems. It was, as T'Vrak had briefed the senior staff, a procedure with well-understood parameters and an acceptable margin of risk, provided all personnel remained behind the emitter boundary line — a strip of yellow-painted deck plating that ran in a wide arc around the containment apparatus.

"This line," T'Vrak had said at the briefing, pointing to the precise demarcation with one long finger, "is **not a suggestion**. It represents the edge of the active resonance field. Personnel inside the boundary during energization may experience unpredictable interaction between the exotic matter sample and their biological field signatures. I will not be conducting the experiment twice because *someone* was curious."

He had looked, at the conclusion of that sentence, *directly at Captain Meng Oren*.

Meng had looked back at him with the particular expression she wore when she was agreeing with someone while simultaneously planning to ignore them — ears angled forward, tail at a thoughtful midpoint, eyes half-lidded. T'Vrak had noted the expression and filed it under *concern: moderate*.

The lab was now populated with a team of six science officers, two engineers supporting the field emitter array, and T'Vrak himself, standing at the primary control interface with

the calm focus he brought to all things. The containment matrix hummed. The filament's resonance signature pulsed on the monitor displays in cool blues and silvers, a wavelength pattern that did not match anything in the Federation database.

Captain Meng Oren was leaning against the far wall, arms folded, watching. She was in the approved observation area — behind the yellow line, *technically* — though T'Vrak had observed she was leaning as far forward as the posture would permit while still maintaining contact with the wall.

"Initiating resonance capture sequence," T'Vrak announced. "All personnel confirm positions."

Confirmations came in around the room. T'Vrak's fingers moved across the interface, precise and unhurried. The hum of the containment matrix deepened. On the monitors, the filament's signature began to respond, a tendril of exotic energy being drawn toward the collection aperture at the heart of the apparatus.

It was, by every metric, proceeding correctly.

"The resonance sample is responding to the attractor field," T'Vrak said. "Collection will be complete in approximately ninety seconds. At that point—"

He heard, behind him, **the sound of footsteps crossing the yellow line.**

T'Vrak did not turn around. He did not need to. The bio-sensor on his left panel registered a new life sign inside the boundary: *Caitian, female, 55 kilograms.*

"Captain," he said, in the tone he reserved for situations in which he wished to be heard without raising his voice, "you are inside the boundary."

"I just want a closer look," Meng said. She was already halfway to the apparatus, her night-adapted eyes tracing the lines of energy converging in the containment matrix with what T'Vrak could only describe as *hungry* interest. "I can see the resonance pattern from here — is it actually shifting as it collects? That's remarkable. T'Vrak, look at the way the—"

"Captain." He turned now. "I must advise in the strongest possible terms that you return to the observation zone. The resonance capture is active. The interaction parameters for a living biological field inside this boundary are—"

"Ninety seconds, you said." She crouched slightly, peering at the apparatus from a new angle. Her ears had rotated forward fully. Her tail, visible behind her, was the upright and confident position of a person who has made a decision they feel good about. "I'll be out in sixty."

"Captain—"

"T'Vrak. *Look at this.* Tell me you don't want to look at this from this angle."

T'Vrak looked at the apparatus. It was, *objectively*, more visually striking from the closer vantage point. He did not allow this observation to influence his assessment.

"I want you to step back behind the line," he said.

"Sixty seconds," Meng said.

The containment matrix chose that moment to produce a sound that none of the pre-experiment models had predicted: a low, sustained harmonic, like a chord played on an instrument built from physics rather than wood or wire, resonating somewhere below the threshold of comfortable hearing. Every person in the room felt it in their teeth.

"Commander," said Ensign Parlis from the secondary console, "I'm reading an unexpected interaction between the resonance sample and — I think it's the captain's bio-field—"

"Captain, return to the observation zone immediately," T'Vrak said, moving toward her, one hand already reaching for the emergency shutdown interface at his belt.

Meng stood up. "Alright, alright, I'm—"

The resonance matrix produced a second sound, this one not a chord but a crack, as though the fabric of the local subspace environment had been struck sharply with something very precise. The monitors in the lab registered it as a cascade event — the exotic energy sample interacting with an unexpected variable, folding back on itself, phase-inverting within the containment field.

The room went white.

Not dimmed, not brightened — *erased*. Pure, absolute white, the color of no color at all, filling every eye in the room with a light that wasn't quite light and a silence that lasted exactly long enough to be terrifying.

Then it was gone.

CHAPTER TWO: SOMETHING IS VERY WRONG

When Meng opened her eyes, the room was exactly as it had been. The lab, the consoles, the emitter array, the personnel at their stations — all present and accounted for. The containment matrix was silent; the resonance sample apparently consumed or dispersed in the event. Everything appeared, in the first half second, to be fine.

In the second half second, Meng noticed that **T'Vrak was not in the room.**

This was strange because T'Vrak had been walking toward her when the flash occurred. He had been close enough that she could have touched him. Now there was simply — space. An absence in the place where a Vulcan had been.

"T'Vrak?" she said.

"I am here," said T'Vrak's voice, *from approximately the location where she was standing*.

Meng looked around the room. She looked left. She looked right. She looked at the space her own feet were occupying. "Where?"

"I am — also uncertain," said T'Vrak's voice. There was, buried beneath his characteristic composure, a note that Meng had learned to identify over two years of working with him: the very faint strain of a Vulcan who has encountered something that requires considerably more processing time than he is currently being allotted.

Around the room, the science team had not moved. They were staring — at Meng, specifically, with expressions that ranged from clinical shock (the two Vulcan ensigns) to wide-eyed human horror (Ensign Parlis, who appeared to be determining whether screaming was appropriate) to the expression of a Bolian petty officer named Threx, who had placed both hands over his blue face and appeared to be reconsidering his career choices.

"What?" Meng said. "What is everyone staring at?"

Ensign Parlis screamed. Briefly, but *genuinely*.

"Report," Meng said, because she was a captain and that was what captains said when they wanted someone to tell them something terrible in an organized fashion. She paused. Her voice had sounded — *odd*. Lower than usual on certain syllables. As if the acoustics of the room had shifted.

"Captain," said Ensign Parlis, who had recovered sufficiently to be pale and professional, "I — there's — you should perhaps look at—" She pointed, helplessly, at a reflective panel on the far wall.

"I am also suggesting the reflective panel," said T'Vrak's voice, from Meng's immediate vicinity.

Meng crossed the room and looked.

The face that looked back at her was not her face.

It was — mostly her face. The orange tabby markings, the large Caitian eyes, the small nose, the rounded ears at the top of the skull. But overlaid upon these features, as though two transparencies had been placed one atop the other and slightly misaligned, were the sharp angles of a Vulcan's cheekbones, the precise arch of a Vulcan's brow, the distinctive point at the ear's outer edge. The features did not compete; they *coexisted*, in the manner of a painting and its underdrawing. The eyes looking back at her were simultaneously Meng's and T'Vrak's — ice blue Caitian irises ringed by the subtly different hue of Vulcan sclera.

The body was taller than Meng's by a significant margin — T'Vrak's height, roughly, though built along lines that suggested Caitian musculature adapted to a different frame. The Starfleet uniform had apparently survived the transition, though it now fit in a way that suggested it had been designed for neither of the people currently wearing it.

Meng looked at this for a long moment.

"I am taller than I should be," she said. Her voice produced the sentence in her own register before dropping, partway through, into T'Vrak's — *a single voice splitting into two distinct timbres inhabiting the same throat*.

"You are experiencing the phenomenon from the perspective of a being 153 centimeters in height," T'Vrak's voice said, from within the same body, flatter and lower than Meng's. "I assure you, the additional height is not an improvement in itself. It carries significant center-of-gravity implications that require recalibration."

"You're in there," Meng said.

"As are you," T'Vrak replied.

"We're in the same—"

"Body. Yes. The evidence is consistent with a complete biological integration event, possibly triggered by the phase-inversion interacting with our respective bio-fields at proximity." A pause that contained, Meng understood, *T'Vrak thinking very hard and very fast*. "I am currently detecting olfactory information at a range and resolution I have never experienced. Is the ship always this — *aromatic?*"

"Welcome to having a nose," Meng said, in a voice that had climbed back into her own register and stayed there, tight with the specific kind of fury that had nowhere to go.

"T'Vrak. **We are in the same body.**"

"I had arrived at that conclusion as well, yes."

"How are you this calm?"

"I am Vulcan," said T'Vrak, as though this were sufficient explanation. "Although I will note that the sensation of a tail is — not something I was prepared for."

The tail in question, Meng's own tail, had dropped to the fully lowered position that her physiological profile associated with fear and submission. She was distantly aware of T'Vrak, from within their shared body, attempting to understand the tail's positional vocabulary and arriving at all the wrong conclusions.

"Don't move the tail," Meng said.

"I was simply—"

"Don't."

Ensign Parlis had, during this exchange, moved carefully toward the door and activated the ship's intercom. Her voice, admirably steady, said: "Bridge, this is Science Lab Seven. We have a — situation. Please alert Dr. Crusher."

"Dr. Crusher is off-ship," the bridge replied.

Parlis closed her eyes briefly. "Then please alert Commander Scott."

In the reflective panel, the face that was both of them and neither of them looked back with wide eyes — *one mind's expression of horror, another mind's expression of intense analytical interest* — occupying the same features simultaneously.

Meng's voice said: "I want to scream."

T'Vrak's voice said: "**Fascinating.**"

Meng's voice said: "How is this *fascinating*?"

"It is," T'Vrak replied, with perfect equanimity, "because it is an event unprecedented in recorded xenobiological history. The mechanisms alone—"

"T'Vrak, **we are one person.**"

"Temporarily, one would presume."

"You don't know that!"

"No," T'Vrak said, and for the first time his voice carried something that was *not quite composure*. "I do not."

Petty Officer Threx, who had removed his hands from his face and was staring with the glazed expression of someone updating their understanding of the universe at speed, said, very quietly: "Should I — make tea?"

Nobody answered him.

CHAPTER THREE: SENIOR STAFF MEETING

The conference room on Deck Three had hosted many unusual conversations in the two years since Meng had taken command of the *Kitty Hawk*. First contact briefings. Klingon rescue negotiations. The incident with the antimatter containment misalignment that had required Tommy Scott to explain, over two hours and multiple diagrams, why the secondary hull had been making that particular sound. The meeting after the *Excelsior* evaluation, where Meng had arrived with a mug of Caitian tea and said nothing for three full minutes before sighing and asking someone to pass the report.

This was different.

The senior staff were arranged around the conference table with the careful, considered body language of people who had been briefed on a situation and were now processing it in real time. Lieutenant Commander Tommy Scott sat with his hands flat on the table, staring at the being across from him with the expression of a very good engineer who had been confronted with a problem that was neither mechanical nor fixable with a calibration tool. Lieutenant Zh'kela, the communications officer, had composed her face into the careful neutrality of someone who respected the gravity of the situation but was also — Meng could tell, even from behind T'Vrak's sensory apparatus — working very hard not to react. The remaining department heads arranged themselves along the spectrum between those two positions.

The being that had arrived and taken the seat traditionally occupied by the captain did not quite sit correctly. T'Vrak's height meant the chair was wrong for Meng's sense of where her center of mass should be. Meng's instincts meant the posture was wrong for T'Vrak's bone structure. They had spent the walk from the science lab negotiating the body's gait — two separate ideas about how legs should work, reaching an uneasy compromise that Lieutenant Zh'kela had later described, in a message to her family that would remain classified for the duration of this incident, as *"walking like someone learning to use a transporter for the first time."*

"Thank you all for convening," said Meng's voice, from the head of the table.

"We are aware this is an unusual situation," said T'Vrak's voice, from the same location.

"We will provide the most complete account of the event that our combined understanding permits."

The staff exchanged precisely the variety of glances that senior officers exchanged when they were determining whether one of their superiors had cracked under the pressure of command, and then updating that assessment to: *no, there appear to be two superiors, both rational, inhabiting one body.*

"Before we proceed," T'Vrak's voice said, "I would propose a designation for the current configuration. In the interest of clarity and professional function, I suggest the designation **Me'rak** — a compound of our respective names that is phonetically distinct from either alone, and suitable as a working reference for the duration of this condition." A pause. "I would also propose pronouns of *they* and *them*. We are, definitionally, two individuals. It would be inaccurate to apply a singular referent."

There was a beat of silence.

"I actually think that's reasonable," Meng's voice said, from the same body. It was clear, from the tone, that she was *surprised* to find it reasonable. "Practically speaking, yes. Me'rak." Another pause. "I still reserve the right to hate every moment of this."

"That is your prerogative," T'Vrak agreed.

Tommy Scott rubbed the back of his neck in a way that suggested he was doing complex engineering calculations and finding that none of them applied. "Right," he said. "So — Captain-Commander Me'rak. Can we — I mean, is there any—"

"The medical and science teams are already working on a reversal procedure," Meng's voice said. "We'll address that in a moment." The voice shifted register, dropping to T'Vrak's measured cadence: "There is, however, an immediate command issue that must be resolved before that discussion."

Me'rak looked around the table. The ears on their head — Caitian ears, adapted to a slightly different skull — rotated in the way Meng's always did when she was building to something important.

"Commander T'Vrak is the Kitty Hawk's executive officer," Meng's voice said. "I am her commanding officer. At present, neither of us can effectively fulfill those roles — or any role that requires a single chain of authority, undivided judgment, or — frankly — a standard-issue uniform that fits." A beat. "Under Starfleet regulation 9.12.1, when both the CO and XO are incapable of performing their duties or simultaneously incapacitated, command passes to the next senior officer by active years of service."

The table looked at each other.

"Dr. Abigail Crusher would be that officer," T'Vrak's voice said. "She has twenty three years of active service."

"Dr. Crusher," Meng's voice said, "is currently on Deneva attending to a family matter and is not reachable for command reassignment within the timeframe we're working with."

Lieutenant Zh'kela, quietly, said: "So that would be—"

Everyone turned, with the slow collective motion of people who all knew the answer and were hoping someone else would say it, to Lieutenant Commander Thomas Alexander Scott.

Tommy looked back at them.

"**No**," he said.

"Lieutenant Commander Scott," Me'rak said — **both voices simultaneously**, which produced a harmonic effect that the conference room's acoustics had not been designed to accommodate — "by active years of service, you are the next senior officer. Fourteen years. You are, under current regulation, **Acting Commanding Officer of the USS Kitty Hawk.**"

"I'm an engineer," Tommy said.

"An engineer," T'Vrak's voice said, "is not precluded from command authority. Regulation is clear."

"Monty is the engineer," Tommy said. "I mean — my cousin is *the* engineer. The famous one. I'm just following his footsteps and I'm — I maintain warp cores, Commander. Captain. Me'rak. Whatever." He gestured at them with a kind of helpless honesty. "I *talk* to warp cores. Nicely. I have names for the plasma injectors. I am not a command-track officer and I never wanted to be."

"None of that," Meng's voice said, with the particular warmth she kept for moments when she was being sincere and *wanted it felt*, "means you aren't capable."

Tommy opened his mouth.

"Tommy." Meng's voice again, *quieter*. "I wouldn't tell you if I didn't mean it. You know I don't do things I don't mean."

A silence settled. Tommy Scott looked at the table. He looked at the merged being across from him, whose expression somehow managed to convey simultaneously *Caitian encouragement and Vulcan assessment*.

"How long?" he asked.

"The medical team estimates the reversal procedure will require preparation time of approximately thirty-six hours," T'Vrak's voice said. "Possibly forty-eight."

Tommy breathed out slowly through his nose. "Right," he said. "Right." He straightened in his chair. *The posture of a man putting on a hat he didn't think fit him*. "Right. Alright."

"The captain's chair," Meng's voice said, with the ghost of a smile that pulled strangely at features that were not entirely her own, "is mostly just a chair. You'll be fine."

"That," Tommy said, "is either the most reassuring or the least reassuring thing anyone has ever said to me, and I genuinely can't tell which."

CHAPTER FOUR: THE FIFTY-FIFTY PROPOSAL

The medical bay on Deck Five had a particular quality of light — steady, clinical, designed to make everything visible and nothing comfortable — that Meng had always found faintly oppressive, even in the ordinary course of ship's business. Standing inside it now, in a body that was not entirely hers, with the awareness that another complete person was simultaneously occupying the same square footage and registering the same oppressive light, she found it comprehensively unpleasant.

Ensign Dr. Pritha Vael, the ship's senior resident physician in Dr. Crusher's absence, had clearly been through a significant emotional journey in the preceding four hours. She was composed now, in the manner of someone who had run out of reactions and arrived at a

kind of stunned professionalism on the far side of them, and she presented her findings with the steady voice of a doctor delivering a diagnosis.

"The integration is — **remarkably complete**," she said, and then, as though aware this was not the comfort it might be in other contexts, added: "Structurally. The biological systems are functioning cooperatively. Both consciousness signatures are present and stable. The neural interface between them is — it's unprecedented. We don't fully understand the mechanism."

"The resonance phase inversion," T'Vrak's voice said, from Me'rak's position on the biobed. They were sitting sideways, because the biobed was calibrated for either Caitian dimensions or Vulcan dimensions, and they were currently both. "The filament's exotic energy apparently catalyzed a quantum entanglement event between our respective bioelectric fields at the moment of proximity. Our neurological patterns were integrated into a shared substrate."

"That's our working hypothesis," Dr. Vael agreed. "The good news is that we have a reversal procedure."

The room brightened, slightly, in the collective response of everyone present.

"The procedure would re-induce the resonance condition in a controlled environment," Dr. Vael continued, "using the containment matrix from Science Lab Seven, which we've been reconfiguring. By targeting the integrated bioelectric field with a precisely calibrated inverse resonance pulse, we believe we can reverse the entanglement and re-segregate the two consciousness patterns into their original biological hosts."

A beat.

"The caveat," she said.

"There's always a caveat," Meng's voice said.

"The precision required is — considerable. The resonance pattern in Me'rak's integrated bioelectric field is unique; it's never been produced before. We can model it, but modeling isn't certainty. If the inverse pulse is correctly calibrated, the procedure will succeed. Both individuals will be restored to their original bodies with no expected lasting side effects."

Dr. Vael held her padd with both hands. "If the calibration is even fractionally off — in *either* direction — the integration will stabilize. **Permanently.**"

The room was very quiet.

"How fractionally?" Meng's voice said.

Dr. Vael looked at her padd. "The margin of error that separates success from permanent integration is approximately eleven nanometers in resonance frequency."

"And your confidence in achieving that precision?" T'Vrak's voice asked.

A pause.

"**Fifty percent**," Dr. Vael said.

Me'rak did not immediately respond. The ears on their shared head rotated in opposite directions, which Dr. Vael later noted in her report as *"a phenomenon she had not previously observed and hoped never to observe again."*

"Fifty percent," Meng's voice said at last.

"Yes."

"So we either both get our bodies back," Meng said, "or we — **stay like this. Forever.**"

"That is correct."

Meng's voice said something in Caitian that was not in the universal translator database.

"I would prefer," T'Vrak's voice said, with remarkable steadiness, "not to spend the remainder of my natural lifespan managing conflicting nutritional requirements, emotional regulation systems, and involuntary tail movements." A pause. "I have attempted to remain neutral on the matter. I find I cannot."

"You *want* to do it," Meng's voice said.

"Yes."

"What if it doesn't work?"

"Then we will be permanently merged," T'Vrak said, "which is *also* survivable, if considerably more complicated."

"I hate this," Meng said.

"I am also not enjoying it," T'Vrak replied. "That is, I believe, the first thing we have genuinely agreed on."

Me'rak was quiet for another moment — a loaded silence, the quality of two people having an argument that was happening too fast and too internally for anyone else to follow.

Then the shared body straightened, both presences apparently arriving at the same conclusion from completely different directions.

"Dr. Vael," Meng's voice said. "Proceed with the preparation."

"Tell me when you're ready," T'Vrak's voice added.

Dr. Vael nodded, with the expression of someone grateful to have clear orders. "Thirty-six hours, minimum. We'll work as fast as we can."

"We know," Meng's voice said. "We're not — impatient." A pause. T'Vrak's voice said, dryly: "One of us is."

CHAPTER FIVE: LIFE AS ME'RAK

The thirty-six hours that followed were, by almost every measure, among the most instructive, undignified, and — for the crew of the *Kitty Hawk*, who experienced them at a safe and professional distance — *quietly hilarious* periods in the ship's operational history.

The first problem was breakfast.

Me'rak arrived at the officers' mess at 0700, which was Meng's usual breakfast hour, and stood in front of the food replicator with the posture of a being engaged in a negotiation of significant complexity.

"Caitian blend protein, medium," Meng's voice said.

"I would prefer plomeek broth," T'Vrak's voice said.

A pause.

"*Absolutely not*," Meng said. "Plomeek broth smells like a carburetor and sadness."

"Plomeek broth," T'Vrak said, with the precision of someone who had been eating plomeek broth since early childhood and intended to defend it to the last syllable, "is nutritionally complete, easy to metabolize, and does not require me to smell raw protein before the first hour of my duty shift."

"We need protein," Meng said. "We're Caitian. Partially."

"We are *also* Vulcan," T'Vrak replied. "Partially."

"We are more Caitian than Vulcan right now, I don't care what the bioreadings say."

"That is a factually unsupportable claim."

"It's *my* tail."

"It is *our* tail, which I have been managing admirably given that I have never had one before—"

"You moved it AT the admiral's holographic brief this morning and knocked over T'Vrak's stylus and I had to pretend it was a ship's tremor—"

"That was your tail's fault, I had not yet understood the proprioceptive signals—"

Lieutenant Zh'kela, who had been sitting three tables away trying to enjoy her morning beverage, stared at the middle distance with the expression of someone *mentally composing a message to their insurance provider*.

Me'rak eventually ordered both items and spent twenty minutes negotiating which one to eat first, at which point the protein had cooled and the broth had been deemed "*olfactorily oppressive*" by Meng, and they ate neither, and left.

The second problem was the corridors.

Meng's spatial reasoning was calibrated for a body of 153 centimeters. Every doorway, every corridor junction, every console in the ship had been unconsciously mapped to those dimensions over two years of command. T'Vrak's body, which Me'rak was now operating, stood significantly taller and was built along different proportions, with a different center of mass and a different geometry of reach.

Meng kept underestimating how far the ground was.

She did not trip — she was too coordinated for that, and T'Vrak's Vulcan proprioception was, he had noted, extremely precise once correctly calibrated — but she moved through the ship with the slight overcaution of someone who had been told the floor might be further away than expected. She took stairs one at a time, with both hands available. She approached doorways at angles that suggested she was not entirely confident they would accommodate her.

"You are processing the height differential," T'Vrak observed, from within.

"I'm processing the fact that I'm going to hit my head on the top of Jefferies tube access panel Delta-7," Meng said, navigating carefully around said access panel. "Which I never had to worry about before."

"Statistically, you would not hit the panel. The clearance is 1.3 centimeters above current height."

"1.3 centimeters is not '*statistically fine*,' T'Vrak. 1.3 centimeters is '*definitely going to happen to me at some point when I'm not paying attention*.'"

T'Vrak was quiet for a moment. "That is," he said, with the reluctance of a Vulcan conceding a point, "not an unreasonable assessment."

The third problem — and this was the one that generated the most discussion in crew quarters for the remainder of the voyage — **was the captain's chair.**

Me'rak arrived on the bridge at 0900 for what was intended to be a brief status review with Acting Captain Scott. Tommy was standing near the tactical station, looking at a report with the focus of a man who had committed to a role he hadn't auditioned for and was now giving it everything he had. He looked up when Me'rak entered.

"Captain," he said, with automatic reflex — and then caught himself. "I mean — sorry. Captain-Commander Me'rak. Force of habit."

"Understandable," Meng's voice said.

"Entirely logical," T'Vrak's voice said.

Tommy's expression did a small, complicated thing and then settled. "Status report: we're holding position three light-hours from the filament's last recorded position. Science team is managing the containment lab reconstruction. Engineering has reprogrammed the resonance emitters for the reversal procedure. Everything is — proceeding." He paused. "It's strange sitting in that chair."

"It's a chair," Meng's voice said, with automatic warmth.

"I know," Tommy said. "But it's *your* chair."

"We're not — in the chair right now," Meng pointed out.

Tommy looked at the captain's chair. He looked at Me'rak. He looked at the captain's chair again. "Do you want to—"

"**No**," said both voices, simultaneously. The effect was, as always, *slightly alarming*.

"We would prefer," T'Vrak's voice said, collecting itself, "to stand. Sitting presents dimensional challenges at the moment."

The bridge crew maintained exemplary professional focus. There were no visible smiles. Ensign Parlis, who had apparently volunteered for a bridge shift in an act of what Meng privately suspected was morbid curiosity, stared at her console with the dedication of a person who had made a commitment to looking at her console and *intended to honor it*.

Me'rak stood at the bridge's secondary science station and reviewed reports. This worked reasonably well for approximately twenty minutes, until T'Vrak, reviewing a subspace resonance chart, became genuinely interested in an anomalous reading and began annotating it with the focused intensity of a scientist at work, at which point Meng's sensory system — the Caitian hearing, still operating at full sensitivity — picked up the ventilation harmonics in the bridge's port conduit and she spent several minutes being certain that the harmonic was slightly off from nominal and possibly indicating an early-stage resonance imbalance in the tertiary intake.

"Tommy," she said.

Tommy looked up from across the bridge.

"Port ventilation conduit, tertiary intake. Check the harmonic resonance on that when you get a moment."

Tommy looked at his panel. He ran a quick diagnostic. His eyes narrowed. "How did you—"

"Caitian hearing," T'Vrak's voice said, with something that managed to approximate *pride*.

"I've been telling engineering about that conduit for two weeks," Meng said, with satisfaction.

Tommy sent the maintenance request to the engineering bay, looking at Me'rak with the expression of a man who was updating his understanding of the situation in a direction he hadn't anticipated. "Right," he said. "Got it."

The fourth problem — and this one Meng would not, later, admit had been funny, though T'Vrak noted in his private log that her involuntary purring during it suggested otherwise — **was the holodeck session.**

On the first evening of their merged existence, Meng had proposed a holodeck session on the grounds that she needed to do something that felt normal. T'Vrak had agreed, on the grounds that controlled physical activity would assist in recalibrating the body's proprioception. They had agreed on a low-complexity environment: a coastal walking path from Meng's personal archive, a pacific shoreline with mild wind and a horizon long enough to rest the eyes.

They had not accounted for T'Vrak's Vulcan emotional control attempting to regulate Meng's Caitian sensory response to a coastal wind.

The salt air hit their shared olfactory system at a range and intensity that Meng immediately found deeply, *physiologically wonderful* — a response her nervous system registered in all the classic Caitian ways, including the involuntary, rhythmic vibration in the chest that indicated profound contentment.

"You're purring," T'Vrak observed.

"I'm not doing it on purpose," Meng said.

"The involuntary respiratory rhythm is unmistakable."

"I know what it is, T'Vrak, I've been *doing* it my entire life."

"I have never purred before," T'Vrak said, with the careful neutrality of a man taking a measurement. "It is — not unpleasant."

"*Don't*," Meng said.

"I am simply noting—"

"Don't enjoy the purring, T'Vrak."

"I am not enjoying — I am observing that the physical sensation is—"

"Do not tell me what the purring feels like from the inside. *I live there.*"

A pause.

"The sea air," T'Vrak said, redirecting with the dignity of a Vulcan who had briefly lost the thread, "is agreeable."

"Yes," Meng said. "It is."

They walked in something that approached *companionable silence* for a while — the merged being moving along the coastal path with the careful deliberation of a person who had learned, over thirty-six hours, to negotiate a shared body with something approaching competence. The tail had been mostly mastered by then; T'Vrak had applied his systematic approach to understanding the positional grammar and now moved it with cautious intentionality. Meng had, in turn, learned to give T'Vrak's longer stride its full extension rather than compensating from her shorter-limbed instinct.

"Can I ask you something?" Meng said.

"You may."

"This is strange to say, but — are you alright? Not about the merging. About — the filament. The lab. The fact that this happened." She paused. "You designed that experiment carefully. You told me to stay behind the line."

"I did," T'Vrak said.

"And I didn't."

A silence. The holographic surf moved.

"You are attempting to determine whether I harbor resentment," T'Vrak said.

"I'm asking if you're *okay*."

Another silence, longer. When T'Vrak's voice came again, it was quieter — not less precise, but *operating closer to something beneath the precision*.

"I designed the experiment with appropriate safety parameters," he said. "I communicated the risks. The outcome was not — entirely predictable, even accounting for the variable you introduced." A pause. "I do not hold you responsible for the mechanism of the accident. The filament's behavior exceeded modeled parameters independent of your proximity."

"But I made it worse."

"You increased the probability of an adverse interaction." Another pause. "*However*."

Something in the voice shifted, infinitesimally. "The adverse interaction also produced a dataset of entirely unprecedented xenobiological and quantum mechanical significance. I am aware that this observation is not appropriate comfort."

"It's *a little bit* of comfort," Meng said.

"Then I am glad."

The purring, which had stopped during the conversation, started again — lower, this time, and slower. *Not contentment. The other kind.*

"We're going to be fine," Meng said. "Dr. Vael is very good."

"I am aware," T'Vrak said. "I find I must agree. I also find—" He stopped.

"What?"

"I find that the experience of perceiving with Caitian senses is — I do not have a neutral word for it. The hearing alone. The depth of the olfactory information." A very long pause. *"It is remarkable, Meng."*

She had never heard him use her given name on duty. Off duty, occasionally — in the private sessions where she sat with him while he processed the loss of Vulcan, in the quiet spaces of command. *Never casually.*

"Don't get used to it," she said. But her voice was warm.

"I will not," he agreed. "I very much hope not, in fact."

They walked until the holodeck session's programmed dusk, and then they went to bed — a process that involved considerable negotiation about positioning, blanket temperature, and whether the lights were sufficiently dim — and they both slept, eventually, in the manner of two people who had agreed to be graceful about an impossible situation and *mostly succeeded.*

CHAPTER SIX: ACTING CAPTAIN TOMMY SCOTT

The alert came at 0342, ship's time.

Tommy had been asleep for approximately ninety minutes, which was how long it took him to stop thinking about the plasma coupling reconfiguration he'd ordered on the port secondary hull before accepting that it was, in fact, fine, and close his eyes.

"Bridge to Acting Captain Scott."

He was awake and upright before the sentence finished. Fourteen years in Starfleet engineering had calibrated him to specific tones of urgency. This was a four-alarm tone.

"Scott here," he said, pulling his uniform on. "Report."

"Sir, we're reading an emergency beacon from a Federation civilian freighter, the SS Greenwood, bearing 227-mark-4. Approximately 2.3 light-hours from our current position." Ensign Parlis's voice was steady. "They're reporting a **catastrophic antimatter feed fracture**. Containment is failing."

"Timeline?" Tommy said, already at the door.

"At current degradation rate, containment failure in approximately four hours."

"Can they eject the antimatter pods?"

"Negative. The fracture has compromised the ejection system. They're stuck with it."

Tommy was moving through the corridor at a pace that was technically still walking. "Crew complement on the Greenwood?"

"Forty-two, sir."

"Can anyone else reach them in time?"

A pause. "The USS Pegg is seven hours out, sir. *We are the only vessel in range.*"

"Get me there," Tommy said. "Maximum warp. I'm on my way to the bridge."

He stopped at the comm panel outside his quarters and hit Me'rak's cabin alert — the one that had been programmed with both their names, which still looked strange on the display. "Captain-Commander Me'rak. We have a situation. I could use a consultation."

The response came after roughly twelve seconds. Both voices, which always took a moment to sort themselves out when newly awoken: "*We're here. What is it?*"

He briefed them in forty words on his way to the turbolift. By the time he reached the bridge, he had a full picture of the problem and the beginnings of three approaches to it. The captain's chair, which had spent the past day feeling like someone else's property, *felt less foreign now*, with the immediacy of the problem pressing everything else flat.

Me'rak arrived on the bridge four minutes later, moving with the deliberate efficiency they'd developed over a day and a half of cohabitation. They went directly to the science station.

"I've been reviewing the Greenwood's vessel class schematics," T'Vrak's voice said. "The Class-4 antimatter feed system has a known design limitation — the fracture propagation follows a predictable vector if the initial breach is in the primary conduit junction."

"Where does it go?" Tommy said.

"Toward the secondary containment barrier. If you can establish an external field brace around the secondary barrier before the fracture reaches it, you may be able to slow the degradation significantly."

"Field brace," Tommy said. "Using what?"

"Our own warp field," Meng's voice said. "Bring us in close, overlap our navigational deflector with their secondary containment barrier. Use our field geometry to shore up their field until their engineering team can perform a manual seal on the primary fracture."

Tommy stared at the main viewscreen. The Greenwood's beacon was a small, insistent pulse in the starfield.

"That requires us to hold station approximately **two hundred meters** from a vessel with a failing antimatter containment system," Tommy said.

"Yes," Meng's voice said.

"If their containment fails while we're that close—"

"It won't," Meng's voice said. "Not if we buy them the time. Their engineers are good — the beacon included their damage report, and the fracture propagation rate is slower than standard. *Someone on board knows what they're doing. We give them time, they fix it.*"

Tommy looked at the readings. He looked at the schematics on the secondary display. He looked at the distance calculations. He did the engineering math, which was the math he actually trusted, and found that it checked out.

"Mr. Kessler," he said to the helm, "I need us at the Greenwood's position in — how long can we do it in at emergency warp?"

"Forty-one minutes, sir," said Ensign Kessler, who was very young and very alert and was clearly determined to acquit himself well in front of whoever these three voices in two bodies counted as.

"**Do it,**" Tommy said. He keyed the ship-wide: "This is Acting Captain Scott. All hands to emergency stations. We have a rescue operation. Let's move."

The Kitty Hawk moved.

Tommy looked at Me'rak. "You two okay to stay on the bridge?"

Meng's voice said: "We're staying."

T'Vrak's voice said: "We will provide any technical support you require."

"I might need you to talk me through the field overlap configuration," Tommy said.

"We can do that," said both voices, and *for once the harmony of them felt less like a phenomenon to be startled by and more like exactly what it was: two people who knew what they were doing, standing behind him.*

The forty-one minutes were busy. Tommy ran through the field configuration twice with T'Vrak's voice guiding the geometry and Meng's instinct flagging two places where the models were being too optimistic about field stability at that proximity. He briefed his engineering team in the secondary hull on the manual brace procedure. He established contact with the Greenwood's captain, a broad-shouldered Tellarite named Grek, who was managing a controlled panic with the particular energy of someone who had decided that panic was inefficient and was *furious about the situation* instead.

"You're going to put your ship two hundred meters from my containment breach?" Grek said.

"It's two hundred meters or you lose the ship," Tommy said. "Can your engineers execute a manual primary seal if we give you the time?"

A pause. "**Yes,**" Grek said.

"Then let's go."

The Kitty Hawk dropped out of warp at the Greenwood's position and began the slow, careful approach. On the main viewscreen, the freighter looked tired — a working vessel, scarred and functional, listing slightly on her impulse axis from the containment disruption. Tommy watched the field geometry readouts and talked his team through the overlap configuration one increment at a time.

"Deflector alignment is off by 0.3 degrees," T'Vrak's voice said, from the science station.

"Correcting," Tommy said, already entering the adjustment.

"Field overlap stability is holding at 94%," Meng's voice said. "That's — *actually better than the model projected.*"

"Thank the dual core system," Tommy said. "We've got power to spare for this."

The Greenwood's containment readings stabilized. Slowly, visibly, the degradation curve flattened. Not stopped — *slowed*. Tommy watched the numbers and felt the specific satisfaction of engineering math working out exactly the way it was supposed to.

"Captain Grek," he said, "your field is holding. How long do your engineers need?"

"Twenty minutes," Grek said.

"You've got thirty," Tommy said. "Go."

He stayed at the console for the next twenty-seven minutes without sitting down. The Kitty Hawk held her position — rock steady, four nacelles channeling everything they had into the field configuration, Tommy's engineering team running continuous monitoring on the deflector array. The bridge crew was quiet and focused and professional, and Tommy was aware, at the back of his mind, that *they were working the way Meng had trained them to work*, and that thought was steadying in its own right.

At the twenty-seven minute mark, Captain Grek's voice came through with the particular quality of controlled relief. "Manual seal is complete. Primary fracture is contained. Containment readings are stabilizing."

Tommy exhaled. *He hadn't been aware he was holding his breath.* "Good," he said. "That's good. Mr. Kessler, bring us out to a safe distance. Mr. T'helik, let's get the field back to standard configuration." He keyed the ship-wide again. "**All hands, engineering casualty is resolved. Stand down from emergency stations. Outstanding work.**"

He stood in front of the captain's chair for a moment. **Then he sat in it** — carefully, as a man sits in something borrowed — and looked at the starfield.

Me'rak was still at the science station. When he glanced over, both sets of features on their shared face were oriented toward him with the particular quality of an expression he recognized: *assessment and approval, translated through two personalities.*

Meng's voice said, quietly: "Well done, Tommy."

"I had good advice," he said.

"You had good *instincts*," she replied. "The advice just confirmed them."

T'Vrak said: "Your field configuration decision was the optimal solution. The model I provided was a framework. *The implementation was yours.*"

Tommy looked at the viewscreen. "I'd still like my warp cores back," he said.

Meng's voice, with warmth: "I know."

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE REVERSAL

The science lab on Deck Seven had been reconfigured again — carefully, with the specific precision of a team that understood exactly how insufficient their first configuration had proven. Dr. Vael had spent thirty-nine hours refining the resonance model. T'Vrak's science team — operating under his remote guidance, his instructions delivered through Me'rak and received with the particular attentiveness of people who wished very much to get this right — had rebuilt the containment matrix with eleven additional field calibration nodes.

The yellow line on the deck was gone. The entire floor within the apparatus perimeter was now a single safety containment surface. There was a single entry point, and it was behind a field barrier, and the field barrier could only be opened by someone standing on the outside of it.

Nobody had needed to explain why.

Me'rak stood outside the field barrier and looked at the apparatus that had, thirty-nine hours ago, become the source of their current condition. The lab was quieter than it had been before; the science team was at their stations with the focused calm of people who had rehearsed this moment many times and were trusting the rehearsal. Dr. Vael was at the primary control interface. Ensign Parlis, who had been present for the original incident and had apparently decided that she was going to see this through if it killed her, was at the secondary console.

Acting Captain Tommy Scott was standing just inside the lab doorway with his arms folded and the expression of a man who had been told he couldn't help and had *accepted this while clearly wishing he could*.

"The resonance emitters are calibrated and stable," Dr. Vael said. "The inverse pulse parameters are locked. We're ready when you are."

Meng's voice said: "T'Vrak."

T'Vrak's voice said: "Yes."

A pause.

"If this doesn't work—" Meng started.

"It will work," T'Vrak said.

"You don't *know* that."

"No," he said. "But I have reviewed Dr. Vael's calculations seventeen times, and I find them sound. The preparation has been thorough. The margin for error has been reduced as far as the available technology permits." Another pause. "And I find — having experienced this condition — that I do not wish to remain in it, however remarkable it has been."

"Is that a feeling?" Meng asked.

"It is," T'Vrak said, with the slight compression of a Vulcan acknowledging something. "A preference, *strongly held*. I believe that qualifies."

Meng made a sound that in any other context would have been a laugh. "Alright," she said, and then, to the room: "Dr. Vael. **Proceed.**"

The field barrier opened. Me'rak entered the containment perimeter and stood at the position Dr. Vael indicated — the exact center of the apparatus, at the coordinates the model had identified as the optimal point for resonance delivery. **The field barrier closed.**

"Beginning resonance scan," Dr. Vael said. "Confirming integration pattern." A beat. "Pattern confirmed. Inverse pulse parameters are aligned." She looked up. "**Charging emitters.**"

The containment matrix hummed.

It was the same hum as before — the same deep, fundamental harmonic — but this time shaped and directed, *a tool rather than an accident*. The monitors showed the resonance pulse building in the emitters, climbing toward the threshold that the model predicted would be sufficient.

Meng's voice said, very quietly: "T'Vrak. Thank you. For — this. For being reasonable about it."

T'Vrak's voice said: "Thank you for the use of your olfactory system. I had not appreciated how much information exists in the world at that resolution."

"You're going to miss the Caitian senses."

"I am going to miss them," T'Vrak confirmed, with the evenness of someone accepting a truth they find inconvenient. *"I will not admit this outside this specific conversation."*

"Understood," Meng said.

"Emitters at full charge," Dr. Vael said. "Ready on your mark."

Meng's voice said: "**Do it.**"

The inverse pulse fired.

This time, the white light was not sudden. It *built* — slowly, from the emitters outward, filling the containment field with a brightness that was somehow less violent than the original flash, as though the universe was making a *correction* rather than an error. The hum deepened, reached its peak, held there for two seconds that felt considerably longer—

—and then, with a sound like a chord resolving, it was gone.

The lab was quiet.

At the center of the containment perimeter, two people stood where one person had stood a moment before. They were, both of them, breathing hard, as though they'd been somewhere else and had only just arrived. They were looking at each other. They were looking at their own hands. They were looking at each other again.

Meng's ears, on Meng's head, rotated all the way forward.

T'Vrak's eyebrow, on T'Vrak's face, climbed toward his hairline.

"Captain?" Dr. Vael said.

Meng looked at her hands. She looked at T'Vrak. She was — *shorter* than T'Vrak. Considerably shorter. The ceiling was comfortably close. The world smelled like the lab and the recycled air and T'Vrak's faint Vulcan composure, and she could hear the ventilation harmonics in the port conduit with the absolute clarity she had always had,

and her tail — **her tail was upright, straight up**, the highest position in the vocabulary, the position she associated with triumph and profound relief.

"**Yes**," she said, and her voice came out entirely in her own register, *only hers, hers alone*, and she pressed one hand over her sternum because the feeling of it was unexpectedly large.

T'Vrak said — in his own voice, lower and measured and *entirely his*: "**Separation confirmed.**"

Ensign Parlis sat down on the floor. Not dramatically; simply a person who had reached the end of their available standing energy and was making a rational decision. "Oh thank goodness," she said, from the floor.

Tommy Scott uncrossed his arms. He breathed out. He said: "**Oh thank everything.**"

Dr. Vael had both hands pressed to her face, but she was smiling — *the smile of a doctor who has done her job and it has worked*, which is one of the best smiles available to anyone.

Meng looked at T'Vrak. T'Vrak looked at Meng.

"You're very tall," she said.

"You are very small," he said, and caught himself, and amended with Vulcan precision: "You have returned to your correct dimensions."

"That's better," she said.

"I thought so," he agreed.

CHAPTER EIGHT: AFTERMATH

The formal handoff of command authority happened in the captain's ready room at 0800, the morning after the reversal, with no ceremony and full paperwork. Meng sat behind her desk — the correct height for her again, everything exactly where it was supposed to be, the small navigation crystal her grandmother had given her catching the light from the porthole — and Tommy sat across from her, holding a mug of coffee in both hands *like it was providing him structural support*.

The commendation was already on her desk. She had written it at 0600, after sleeping for six hours, after eating actual breakfast without having to negotiate it with a second consciousness, after taking a water shower that was the single most restorative thing she had experienced in thirty-nine hours.

She slid it across the desk.

Tommy looked at it. He looked at her.

"That's a formal commendation for your service record," Meng said. "Which is already good. This makes it better."

"Captain—"

"**Tommy.**" She leaned forward slightly. "I mean everything in that document. You handled a mass casualty emergency correctly, under conditions that were genuinely unusual — and I'm not talking about the dual-voiced advisory you were receiving, I'm talking about being handed command authority without warning and executing it. You made the right calls. You kept the crew calm. **You saved forty-two people.**" She held his gaze. "That's not because you got lucky. *That's because you're good.*"

Tommy looked at the commendation for a moment. He set down the coffee mug. He picked up the commendation and read it — all of it, which took a minute, because she had not written it briefly.

"I want to be clear about something," he said, when he'd finished. "The engineering bay is *my home*. I'm not — I'm not itching for a bridge posting. I want to be down in the secondary hull with my cores and my plasma manifolds and my very carefully named plasma injectors, and I want that for the rest of my career."

"I know," Meng said.

"And nothing about the past two days has changed that."

"I know that too."

"But." He folded the commendation carefully. "*Thank you, Captain.* I — thank you."

She nodded. It was the nod she used when she meant things she didn't need to say again.

T'Vrak, who had been standing in the ready room doorway with the stillness of a Vulcan who has chosen to observe rather than interrupt, stepped forward. Tommy looked at him.

"Commander T'Vrak," he said. "Good to see you — back in your usual configuration."

"Lieutenant Commander Scott." T'Vrak's hands were behind his back. He had, Meng noticed, been using a slightly different posture since the restoration — upright and precise, as always, but with the fractionally greater deliberateness of *someone who is reacquainting themselves with a familiar thing*. "I am obliged to state, for the record, that your management of the Greenwood rescue presented the qualities of a competent commanding officer. The tactical assessment was sound. The field configuration was the optimal solution available with the resources at hand. The crew's cohesion under your authority was evident."

Tommy blinked. "That's — thank you, Commander."

"I am not offering praise," T'Vrak said, with the purity of Vulcan understatement. *"I am offering an accurate assessment. They are sometimes the same thing."*

"Noted," Tommy said.

A small silence settled over the ready room, *the warm kind* — the kind that happens after things that have been difficult are over, and the difficulty can be given its appropriate weight without pressing down anymore.

"One more thing," Meng said.

Tommy looked at her.

"The port ventilation conduit, tertiary intake. Harmonic resonance. Was it actually off?"

"Yes," Tommy said. "Our diagnostics would have caught it in the next maintenance cycle. The sensors just aren't as sensitive as—" He stopped. He looked at her. *"As you."*

"I've been telling engineering for two weeks," Meng said.

"I know," Tommy said, with the expression of a man who would be having a conversation with his diagnostics system shortly. "We're updating the calibration parameters. As of yesterday." He picked up his coffee. "It'll catch the things you catch."

"Nothing catches the things I catch," Meng said, with the serenity of someone who knows their own value. "But closer is better."

Tommy got up to go. At the door, he paused with one hand on the frame — his natural posture in a doorway, the comfortable lean of a man who spent a lot of time in engineering access points.

"Captain," he said. "For what it's worth — the past two days were the strangest of my career. And parts of them were *very funny*."

Meng's ears moved to the forward-curious position. "Which parts?"

"The breakfast negotiation," he said. "I happened to be walking past the mess at 0700. I wasn't trying to listen."

"The breakfast negotiation was *not* funny," Meng said.

"The plomeek broth versus protein debate was, with respect, **extremely funny**."

"You are dismissed, Lieutenant Commander."

Tommy went, and if there was a smile on his face, Meng decided, for the sake of their professional relationship, not to comment on it.

Later — much later, after the duty shift had turned over and the Kitty Hawk was moving again, back toward the edge of the Tycho expanse where the filament had gone on drifting without them — *Meng walked the decks at night, as she always did.*

The ship breathed around her. She could feel the twin warp cores, deep in the secondary hulls, their rhythm as familiar as her own heartbeat. The port ventilation conduit was quiet, the recalibrated harmonic clean and correct. The corridors were at ship's night lighting, which her Caitian vision navigated without difficulty, every surface resolved in the blue-grey monochrome of low-light adaptation. Her feet knew where the floor was. The ceiling was comfortably above her.

She paused at the observation lounge on Deck Ten, which had a view aft — the stars behind them, the long light of where they'd been. She stood at the transparent aluminum viewport for a long moment with her hands folded behind her back and *her tail at the mid-height of contentment.*

The door opened behind her.

"I thought you might be here," T'Vrak said.

She didn't turn. "You thought, or you checked the internal sensors?"

"Both," he said.

He came to stand beside her, in the manner he had developed over two years of shared command, and they looked at the stars together.

"How are you?" Meng said.

"I am—" He paused, which was unusual for him. T'Vrak paused for precision; he did not pause for uncertainty. *This was a different kind of pause.* "Processing," he said at last. "The experience was significant."

"It was," she agreed.

"I have added several items to my personal medical file," he said, "including, for the first time, a documented instance of involuntary purring."

Meng's tail flicked.

"The notation," T'Vrak said, "is under '*acquired sensory response: Caitian, duration 39.4 hours, non-recurring.*'"

"Non-recurring," she repeated.

"One would hope."

"One would," Meng agreed.

She looked at the stars behind them — the places the Kitty Hawk had already been, marked by nothing but light and the record of what they'd done there. Then she looked at the viewport's reflection: T'Vrak's face, Vulcan and precisely arranged, and beside it, at considerably lower elevation, her own — orange and tabby-marked and *entirely herself*.

Two different faces. Two different bodies. The right number of people for two people.

"T'Vrak," she said.

"Yes, Captain."

"If you ever need to talk about Vulcan—" she started.

"I know," he said. "I know where to go."

She nodded.

They stood at the viewport for a little while longer, watching the stars move, listening to the ship breathe, and then — because they had an early duty shift, and a filament to re-approach, and a crew that had earned a decent day's work after a genuinely unusual week — they went back to their respective quarters and slept, separately, as two separate people, *which was exactly as it should be*.

The Kitty Hawk moved through the dark, and her captain, and her first officer, and her acting captain who would emphatically not be repeating the experience, all dreamed whatever they dreamed — and in the morning, there was work to do, and the stars to find, and the ship to listen to, and **the whole enormous galaxy waiting just beyond the edge of what they already knew**.

Stardate 2282.053 — End of Log USS Kitty Hawk, NCC-1669 — "Innovation Takes Flight"