



The star was a supergiant and very old. Over billions of years the forces that had powered it throughout its long life had finally exhausted themselves. Now it was falling in upon itself. The cataclysmic gravitational collapse triggered the spectacular explosion known as a supernova. What was left at the core of the supergiant was a neutron star, cold and dense and dead. Everything else was blown outward, creating a brilliantly glowing shock wave traveling at nearly a tenth the speed of light that swept up everything in its path. For a day or two this supernova remnant would shine more brightly than any other corner of the galaxy. A star had died.

Elsewhere in the cosmos, in an unremarkable corner of one galactic arm, a child was born. Such is the balance of existence.

Though his arrival was considerably less dramatic than the passing of the supergiant, it was in its own way no less remarkable. As some stars have unusual origins, so too did the squalling infant. At the moment this was not a concern

of the pair of medical specialists who were attending the delivery. Reflecting as well as honoring their own ancient culture, the actual birthing was a combination of the traditional and the ultramodern. The former ensured that the occasion would be memorable for the mother while the latter precluded any possibility of miscarriage. Though they had overseen hundreds of birthings, the medical team in attendance was especially focused on the one that was taking place this morning. This was not because the father happened to be of high status and held various important positions within the government.

It was because the mother—was different.

As she cleaned the newborn, the older of the two specialists noted the infant's steady breathing as well as the force with which he kicked. His occasional squalling rose above the soft traditional music that filled the room.

"He is strong, this one."

Carefully she passed it to the mother. As she took her offspring in her arms, tears appeared at the corners of her eyes and began to trickle down her smooth cheeks.

"Hello," she whispered to her child.

Taking her superior aside, the younger specialist murmured softly as she studied the tender bonding—and the peculiar weeping.

"The baby is healthy. Why does she cry?"

The older woman replied, as if it explained everything, "She is human."

It did explain everything.

A distant buzz caused both of them to turn. "Sarek arrives," the senior of the two specialists observed.

His breathing was labored from the haste with which

he had traveled, but Sarek remained completely under control. In other words, for a new Vulcan father, he was normal. Though he regarded the exhausted mother of their child without smiling, the pride and affection he felt shone clearly in his face.

Though they betrayed no emotion, all the attendants in the room strained for a better look. Details of the pregnancy and subsequent delivery were hardly conventional and the attendants' curiosity was understandable.

As her respiration returned to normal, Amanda Grayson regarded her newborn proudly. Though she was the only human in the delivery chamber, she did not feel isolated or alone. It was a state of affairs to which she had grown accustomed and one that she had willingly embraced. Besides, she was hardly alone. Sarek was there. Her husband was there.

And about time, too.

Pushing back his hood, Sarek approached the bed and knelt beside it. Having completed her duties, the medical specialist stepped back to allow the parents their first moment together as a complete family. Like her companions, the specialist said nothing. It was not her job to comment on the singular circumstances of the birth and certainly not the time to do so. Her task and those of her associates was to bring newborns safely into the world. This they had done, with skill and precision and caring. Any personal opinions they might hold they kept entirely private. To do otherwise would have been . . . impolitic.

Sarek knelt beside the bed. Beside his wife and child.

"Well done."

Through the joy and pain she still managed a sardonic reply.

“Thanks.”

The awkwardness of the moment caused him to momentarily look away.

“Your tone suggests disappointment. I fully understand. To be absent at the critical moment was not my wish. The Science Council required my presence for a session regarding . . .”

She interrupted him. “Don’t do that. You knew I wanted you here.”

Catching the two birthing specialists exchanging a look, Sarek threw them one of his own that caused both of them to hurriedly excuse themselves. Reaching across to a small touchpad, he slid one finger across the pressure-sensitive surface. The music that had filled the birthing chamber ceased.

“As you are aware, the Vulcan male is traditionally not present at the moment of delivery.”

She was not mollified. “Well, *traditionally* I’m the one giving birth. I moved here, to another *planet*, to be with you. I need you to be with *me* today. Holding my hand and telling me I’m doing great, even when I’m just—*breathing* the best I can.”

For a long moment it was silent in the chamber save for the baby’s burbling and soft crying. Then Sarek moved as close to the bed as possible, as close to his wife as possible, and lowered his voice.

“You are correct. Our love has already proven itself stronger than tradition. I should have been here. I am sorry.”

The smile that broke out on her face was radiant. Using her free hand she pulled him to her, and they kissed. To-

gether, they contemplated the wonder they had brought into the world.

“Look—look at our boy. He’s so beautiful. . . .”

“I had a thought,” Sarek began.

“You often do.” Her smile widened.

Even for a human, she was incorrigible, he thought fondly. “I thought we might name the child after one of our respected early society-builders. His name was Spock.”

Regarding her striking newborn, Amanda pondered the suggestion until Sarek began to stir uneasily.

“Your silence does not suggest overwhelming enthusiasm.”

“No . . .” She hesitated a moment longer and then her smile returned. Reaching out, she lightly touched the baby’s nose. “*Spock*. It’s fine. It’s a *good* name. ‘Spock.’”

“The child has your eyes,” her husband murmured lovingly.

Reaching over, she carefully pulled aside the upper swaddling. One forefinger pushed gently at a still-curved ear until it unfurled like a tiny flower—a flower that was pink and pointed.

“And your ears,” she added affectionately.

The *U.S.S. Kelvin* was not alone. That bothered Captain Pierre Robau almost as much as the fact that it was presently sharing this part of Federation space with an as-yet-unidentified intruder. Judging by his expression, Lieutenant Pitts was even more troubled; the other officer was clearly unsettled. Whether by something that was thus far inexplicable or something else, Robau could not tell.

Well, they should have some answers soon enough.

Even though Pitts had little of substance to say, he couldn't stop talking. Robau chose not to upbraid his subordinate. When excitement slammed up against concern, it was best whenever possible to allow those submerged in the resultant mix the opportunity to vent. That way when an actual crisis did manifest itself, reason would have a better chance of supplanting emotion.

"... We don't know why our sensors didn't detect the anomaly earlier. It doesn't make any sense, since its gravitational reading's off the charts. We should have picked it up at much greater range than we did. Our people are going crazy trying to classify it, an..."

Pitts's exposition continued as the lift doors parted to admit both men to the *Kelvin's* bridge. No one there was taking their ease. Some were moving quickly from one station to another to check readouts or confer with their colleagues. Everywhere, hands and eyes were in constant motion. Old reports were being processed and new queries initiated.

One day, Robau told himself, we'll be able to do away completely with the primitive inputting of information via repeated digital impression and just talk to a ship's central data processing system about everything. But not yet. Voice recognition technology was fine for handling basic ship operations, but not for handling the immense complexities involved in directing the more intricate activities of a starship. A command wrongly interpreted by a toaster might result in burnt toast. A command wrongly interpreted by a starship as powerful as the *Kelvin* might result in consequences rather more serious. Starfleet was working on the problem, he knew, and such technology was improving by

the day. For example, there was a new ship under construction that . . .

It wasn't his ship, he reminded himself as he approached the *Kelvin's* first officer. Whatever they were facing, they would have to make do with existing technology.

"Report."

"Readings show gravitational distortions on an astromonic scale, Captain, but we can't localize the source. I know that's contradictory, but the anomaly is irregular and—I don't know how else to say it—all over the place. We're still trying to identify a nexus and—" He broke off as his instruments demanded his attention. "Sir, new contact, bearing zero-three-four."

An alarm began to sound throughout the bridge and the rest of the ship. *Proximity warning*, Robau knew. But proximate to what? How could the *Kelvin's* sensors be overwhelmed by a gravitational distortion they couldn't pinpoint?

Glancing in Robau's direction, the helmsman imparted information that was also an opinion. "Captain, we're a full light-year outside the Klingon Neutral Zone. Unless this is another of their probes or provocations, it doesn't seem reasonable the distortion would have anything to do with the Empire."

Approaching the helm, Robau directed his attention to the screen that showed the view from the forward sensors. There was nothing to be seen there but star field. Yet unless the *Kelvin's* instrumentation had been impossibly compromised or had otherwise suffered a massive failure of indeterminate cause, something *was* out there. Something imposing. And according to the sensors, not nearly as far distant as the readings suggested it ought to be.

“Could the anomaly be reflecting the presence of a new type of ship drive?”

“If it is originating from a vessel, then it’s not Klingon, sir.” The first officer was very certain. “The distortion that’s being generated doesn’t match any recorded profile.”

“As I said—something new, then.” Robau continued to study the forward view.

“Something different, anyway,” the science officer murmured under his breath as he scrutinized his own instruments.

“There!” It was the communications chief who spoke first.

Ahead of the *Kelvin* a gigantic ring of energy flared explosively to life. To many it looked like a lightning storm in space. That in itself would have been enough to draw the attention of everyone on the bridge. But the dazzling disruption of otherwise empty space was not what fixed the gaze of all who were present. Their attention was focused on the shape that was materializing from the center of the anomaly.

“Is that,” the science officer whispered in awe, “a *ship*?”

Someone—or *something’s*—idea of a ship continued to emerge from the precise center of the circular gravitational distortion. And continued to emerge. An immense construct of paralyzed geometry rendered solid in metal and composite and materials the *Kelvin’s* sensors could not fully explicate, it completely dwarfed the Federation vessel. Starling at it, the science officer was put in mind of a gigantic mutated squid that had been unable to stop itself from growing more and more tentacles than it needed. In vast sweeping curves of dark material lit only intermittently by

internal illumination, these “arms” curved toward the tiny *Kelvin* as if reaching out to grab the much smaller ship.

“It looks,” the science officer declared, “as if whoever designed it couldn’t stop building. I’ve been in a couple of historical structures like that, where the owners just kept adding room after room without any thought as to whether or not they were needed or would ever be utilized.” He nodded in the direction of the forward viewscreen. “I don’t know what it is or where it came from, but if it’s Klingon I’ll swallow a *d’k tahg* points first.”

While impressed by the intruder’s immensity, Robau was more concerned with its purpose. “Are they transmitting anything? On any frequency?”

Gazing at his console, the communications chief shook his head. “Negative, Captain. All hails meet with silence. As near as I can tell, they’re not even talking to themselves.”

Too quiet, Robau thought uneasily. Whoever was behind anything that big ought to have something to say. And the vessel, if that was indeed what it was, was showing too much internal illumination to suggest it might be a ghost ship. Was its crew even now studying the *Kelvin* and thinking similar thoughts? It was hard to formulate any reasonable assumptions, given the paucity of information. Just as it was difficult to decide how to respond to the intruder’s continuing silence.

“Keep hailing them. You’re sure there’s nothing on the registry at all, not even speculation about an experimental craft of this size?”

“No, sir,” replied the first officer.

Robau understood that putting up shields could be in-

terpreted as a hostile gesture. But doing nothing could be a fatal one.

“Go to Yellow Alert, shields up.”

“Shields up, yes, sir!” As the tactical officer inputted the command, the relevant telltales on the bridge responded accordingly. Throughout the *Kelvin* meals were abandoned, conversations terminated, and entertainment venues both general and private automatically shut down as the crew scrambled to battle stations.

The communications officer’s frustration was clear in his voice. “Captain, they’re still not responding to our hails. Even if there’s a language problem, they ought to acknowledge our abstracts.”

Once again Robau considered the possibility that they were confronting a ghost ship. But if that was the case, then why had it emerged so near to them from the depths of the gravitational anomaly? Coincidence? Had the craft possessed a functioning crew on the other side of the anomaly that had only just this moment gone silent?

“Maybe they can’t,” he hypothesized. “I know it’s a radical configuration we’re looking at, but I’d still think our sensors could discern any identifiable damage. Atmosphere bleed, excessive radiation discharge, visible hull violation—something to indicate that they’re disabled.”

The first officer was quick to shoot down the possibility. “Negative. It may be distinctively peculiar, sir, but it appears to be intact.”

Robau looked toward Pitts. “Lieutenant, signal all departments and add a special alert to science detail. First contact protocols to be initiated. We might have someone new on the block.”

Pitts nodded his comprehension. "Should we initiate a scan?"

Despite his desperate desire to know more about who or what they were confronting, Robau did not have to ponder the officer's question. He replied immediately.

"No. Could be seen as an act of further provocation. That they haven't responded in a hostile fashion to us raising our shields is a positive sign. Let's build on that." He nodded toward the helmsman. "Take us in for a closer look—nice and slow. Passive scans only. No maneuvers that could be interpreted as aggressive."

Slowly and on impulse power the *Kelvin* began to approach the gargantuan creation. Given the continuing lack of information, no one could even be certain as yet that the visitor was a ship. For all they knew at this point, it might be a comatose inorganic life-form. Despite himself the science officer again had visions of reaching tentacles.

"The size of the thing," the first officer was murmuring. "Even its construction materials are unrecognizable. If it is a ship, its internal power supply must be off the charts. The amount of dilithium alone required to—"

Speculation was cut off by warning signals. Pitts's eyes grew wide as he stared at his instruments. "Sir, I have a reading—they've locked weapons on us!"

Robau's expression tightened. "Are you *absolutely certain*, Mister Pitts?"

"Yes, sir! The pertinent signatures are new but not unrecognizable." He whirled to face the captain. "There's no doubt!"

That answered the question as to whether or not they were dealing with a ship, Robau decided. "Red Alert! Arm weapons systems!"

Anyone on board who had neglected to fully comply with the previous alert needed no further urging to drop whatever they had been doing and respond to stations. Lights and warnings flared and blared throughout the length and breadth of the *Kelvin*.

“Incoming!” Pitts yelled the warning as an almost familiar energy schematic appeared on his main monitor. An instant later the first officer confirmed his fellow officer’s reading of the newly detected signal.

“Torpedo locked on us at three-twenty degrees, mark two, incoming fast! Type unknown, propulsion system unknown, capability unknown!”

Those not seated scrambled to brace themselves for impact as Robau roared orders.

“Evasive pattern delta five. Return fire, full spread! Prepare to—!”

There was no time to prepare.

Unexpectedly, the incoming weapon seemed to shatter. Instead of a single missile it devolved into a spray of smaller yet still immensely powerful projectiles. Slamming into the *Kelvin*, the unknown weapons ripped open several decks before finally concluding their path of destruction near the main engine room. Men and women were sent flying by the massive explosion that ensued. Others died almost instantly as the hull in their vicinity was breached and they were sucked out into the vacuum of space. Supports were twisted, sensitive instruments shattered, lines of communication severed. Precious atmosphere was consumed by fire that the ship’s automatic suppressors struggled to keep from spreading.

From the command chair on the bridge a tense Robau hailed engineering. “Damage report! What’s our main power?”

The technician who replied was not the chief of section. That venerable and respected senior officer lay somewhere farther toward the stern, having perished instantly when the torpedo had struck.

"Our shields did nothing. All weapons systems off-line. Decks nine through fourteen report hull integrity compromised and numerous casualties." He paused to glance at a handheld monitor. *"Main power at thirty-eight percent, and I don't know how long we can maintain that!"*

Dragging himself back to his station, the first officer slammed a hand down on the open communicator. "Deck nine, bridge here—report."

"Plasma seals activated and holding. Can't say for how long, but for the moment we're tight."

The first officer fought to gather himself—both his wind and his wits. "Winona—is she okay? My wife?"

The reply steadied him. *"Yes, sir. That's the good news. Bad news is, she's gone into labor."*

Eyes wide, the officer turned sharply in the direction of the captain's chair. Robau had also heard the reply. He was preparing to respond when a cry from Pitts filled the bridge.

"They're firing another, Captain!"

Engineering's report had been devastatingly accurate: for all the protection they were offering against the current attack the *Kelvin's* shields might as well have been made of aerogel. Barely deflected, the blast from the second torpedo tore a gash along the Federation vessel's primary hull. Flames flared and vanished as the oxygen that fueled them was consumed or dissipated into space. Every deck was rocked and, if not directly impacted by the explosion, suf-

ferred subsidiary damage that was life-threatening and ongoing.

"Life support failing on decks seven through thirteen!" the helmsman shouted.

"Get Starfleet Command on subspace!" Robau fought to make himself understood over the growing chaos and confusion. "Emergency power to communications!"

"Shields at eleven percent." Somehow the first officer had managed to stay at his station and monitor what remained of his instrumentation. "Eight percent! *Six!*"

"That was like nothing I've ever seen." The tactical officer was staring at his own readouts and shaking his head. "Velocity and condensed explosive capacity—we can't take another hit!"

Robau forced himself to stay calm. He had been through situations like this many times previously—in simulations. To the best of his knowledge no one had ever been through it in actuality. Gigantic unknown ship, unknown weapons, dead silence: nothing to do but wait for . . . what?

The answer arrived more quickly than he expected.

"Captain," declared the first officer with obvious surprise, "we're being hailed."

Shoot first, talk later. An inauspicious way to commence embryonic negotiations. Especially when your side couldn't shoot back. Still, he mused, no matter what happened next, talking was better than dying.

"Open communications." Settling back into the command chair, Robau tried to compose himself. No matter what ensued, he wasn't going to let their unknown enemy see that he was rattled. "And keep our transmission tight on me. No need to let them see the damage they've inflicted."

There was a moment of distortion before the forward screen cleared. The face that appeared on the monitor was humanoid. It featured heavily tattooed skin, pointed ears, and, in parallel primate terms at least, an unpleasant expression. In excellent Federation lingua franca it addressed its audience in a tone that was unapologetically severe.

"Starship captain. I am Ayel. My captain requests the presence of your captain in order to negotiate a cease-fire. He will speak to you only in person. Face to face. Come alone. You come aboard our vessel via shuttlecraft. It is unnecessary to provide docking coordinates. Once you are within pickup range, your craft will be acquired and directed to the appropriate location."

Well, Robau thought, *at least now they finally had some information. Even if none of it was good.*

"And if I refuse?" he responded appropriately.

The visitor was remorseless. *"Your main engines have been severely damaged. You can no longer achieve warp speed. Your weapons are disabled. Your refusal would be unwise."* The screen went blank.

For a moment dead silence reigned on the *Kelvin's* bridge.

"Not a very talkative bunch," the communications officer finally murmured.

Pitts looked sharply at the command chair. "Sir, who are they?"

A dissenting voice sounded from the vicinity of another console as the first officer continued to study his flickering instrumentation. "I think he's Romulan."

Robau blinked. He was processing information, details, statistics that had not been reviewed in a long time,

because there had been no reason for him or anyone else to do so.

“We haven’t had contact with any Romulans in over fifty-three years, how can you identify—?”

Apologetically, his first officer cut him off. “They’re the closest known genetic cousins of Vulcans.” He nodded in the direction of the forward monitor. “The body markings that were visible on this Ayel’s face and neck, epidermal coloration, attire, all point to him being Romulan and not Vulcan. And one more thing, sir.”

“What’s that?”

“Even though he was brusque and only relaying orders, this Ayel was very, very emotional.”

All eyes remained on the captain as everyone waited for Robau to come to a conclusion. It did not take long. When you’re down to a single option, decision-making becomes simple.

“As long as they want to talk, there’s a way out of this. Has to be. Only logical. If their intent from the beginning was to destroy us, we wouldn’t be sitting here discussing their motivation now.” Rising from the command chair, he gestured at his first officer. “Commander—walk with me.”

As the two most senior officers on the ship strode its damaged corridors their passing drew only occasional glances from the rest of the crew. Much as they might wish to inquire of their captain and first officer as to the nature of the situation in which they presently found themselves, and desperate as they were for news, not one crew member stepped in their path, shouted a query, or otherwise tried to engage the two men. It was in situations such as the one

they were currently facing that Starfleet training proved its worth.

Robau addressed his second-in-command evenly. "If this goes bad, I mean really bad, I'm granting you authority to execute General Order Thirteen."

The younger man at his side momentarily lost his stride. "Sir, we could issue a mayday call to . . ."

Robau was too human not to show that he was at least a little afraid. That did not in any way affect his resolve. "There's no help for us out here. Even if someone responded they'd never get here in time. If we're going down we're taking them with us. Do as you're told. Save as many as you can." Stepping into the waiting turbolift, he turned to face the other man. The first officer's expression was stricken. Both men knew what was at stake. Both men looked at each other for what each suspected might well be the last time.

"Aye, Captain." Stepping back, the younger man saluted sharply.

Punching the lift control, Captain Robau left his first officer with one last directive.

"You're captain now—Mister Kirk."