

A USS. Merlin Adventure

Age, not wisdom

By Robert Lydford

'This is the USS. Searcher, a Federation Oberth Class Science Vessel, to any ship that can receive this message, Two days ago, an unknown vessel attacked us. Our Life-support is on reduced power and we are drifting within a type seventeen Nebula. Please render assistance.' Captain Leila Jackson, dropped into her command seat, and looked up at the grime-smeared face of her Bolian engineer. 'It's not good, I'm afraid.' His words only seemed to confirm what she already knew. She rubbed her brow. 'Do we have anything, weapons, Navigation, sensors?' He shook his head sadly. 'All available power, is almost running life-support.' She cursed under her breath. 'I hate to be the bearer of bad news Captain, but we're drifting further into the nebula.' A Bajoran woman called out, as she shrugged sadly. 'What about manoeuvring thrusters?' The Captain asked.

'Port side only, I'm afraid, and even they're intermittent. The Bolian moaned. Captain Jackson stood up, and paced to and fro within the short space between her chair and Caitian woman at Mission Ops. 'Sir!' the Caitian woman ventured, a soft purring sound in her voice.

'Yes Lieutenant?' She asked, a note of hope in her voice. The Nebula is making it difficult to scan out, but I think there's another ship approaching.' Captain Jackson moved quickly to stand beside the orange furred Caitian woman. 'Where?' She asked as she looked over the Ops. Screen. The Caitian's red painted claw tapped the screen. 'It's this damn nebula sir, It's full of Sirillium, Theta xenon gas and Thoron radiation. But I'd bet my tail! That there's a ship out there.' An Ensign in an engineer's uniform rolled out from beneath an open panel below the main viewer, which crackled into life as it was filled with an image of the nebulous blue gas. 'Sir!' He called out. Leila turned and smiled at the Viewer. 'Good work Ensign, How are you with Sensors? He grinned, as he wiped his hands on a rag and picked up his tools. 'I came third in my class Sir, but I've had a lot of practise since.' She nodded.

'Then see if you can give Lieutenant Emrah some help with getting our sensors recalibrated and re routed through that damaged Ops console.' He nodded as the Caitian helped him remove access panels from the consoles base pedestal. Leila sat down, hard in her command chair, as she glanced over, to her Bajoran Navigator. 'Ensign Tal, where's the nearest Starbase?' The young woman looked hard at her screen. 'That would be Starbase 410, sir. It's a four days away at warp six.' Captain Jackson shook her head. Well, it was worth a try, I suppose.' She said, hiding the note of despondency in her voice. She turned to the Communications officer. Ensign O'Leary, see if you can boost our distress signal. The man nodded. 'I'll give it my best.' He said in a soft Irish brogue. 'But we don't have much in the way of Transmitting power.' She nodded her understanding. He glanced up a few minutes later.

'Don't ask me were it came from sir, but I've managed to boost our transmitter output by another four percent. But it still won't reach the nearest Starbase.' She gave him a weak smile.

A static filled message came through the USS. Merlin's emergency channel. 'T-is is – U-S. Sea-her, to a-y ship that can –ve- this -ssage, we h-ve been att-d by an unk-wn vessel. Our Life-s-port is on r-ed p-r and we are drif-ng wit-n a type se-een Ne-la. Plea-ren-er assi-nce.'

Aboard the Akira class USS. Merlin, Admiral Dalen Varr, glanced up from his morning coffee. 'What was that?' He asked, sitting forward and balancing his coffee cup on the command chairs armrest. His Andorian Communications officer looked

up, from her console. 'It sounds, like a distress call sir! Hang on I'll see if I can clear it up a little.'

'This is the U-S. Se-rcher, a F-eration O-erth Class Scie-ce Ves-el, to any ship that can receive this me-age, we have been atta-ed by an un-own v-ssel. Our Life-support is on r-duced po-er and we are dri-ting within a ty-e seventeen Ne-ula. Please ren-er assistance.'

Admiral Varr stood up. 'Okay Lieutenant, one more time, and see if you can filter out some more of that damn static.' She nodded. 'Aye sir!' She said, as this time the message came through clearly.

'This is the USS. Searcher, a Federation Oberth Class Science Vessel, to any ship that can receive this message, we have been attacked by an unknown vessel. Our Life-support is on reduced power and we are drifting within a type seventeen Nebula. Please render assistance.'

Admiral Varr moved to stand at his ships tactical rail, and spoke in hushed tones to the blond man standing there. 'Andrei, What do we know about the USS. Searcher?' Lieutenant Commander Andrei Sergeyeovich, the Merlin's Security chief grinned. 'Way ahead of you sir, I'm already checking Starfleet records as we speak.' Varr smiled. As a picture of young black woman in Captain's uniform filled the screen, her image turned slowly from portrait to profile and back. Beside her, on the screen was the Image of an Oberth class science vessel. Andrei read out extracts from the file.

'Captain Leila Jackson, thirty-two standard years old, She was born on Earth just outside Chicago. She graduated, nine years ago with degrees in Astrophysics and several Theoretic sciences. She has a genius level IQ. Rated at two hundred and six. Her immediate family died at the Battle of Wolf - three - five - nine, aboard the Federation Starship Saratoga. She served three years aboard Starbase Three - one - seven, as a junior science officer where she took and passed her first level command exam. This saw her promoted to Lieutenant. She then signed on to a Nebula Class Science Vessel the USS. Darwin. A year later she was field promoted to Assistant to its chief science officer, and promoted to Lieutenant Commander Two years later. She made Commander a couple of years after that. The USS. Searcher is her first Captaincy; she's a recently refitted, Oberth Class vessel, USS. Searcher. NCC. 58312. It's current assignment is to take readings from the three Nebulas in this area of space.' Dalen Varr patted the man on the shoulder. 'Nice work Andrei.' The Admiral then turned to Orion woman at the helm. 'Lieutenant Kiah set intercept course, one quarter impulse. He then turned to T'Pren, his Vulcan Executive Officer. 'You seem quiet number one.' She stared at him. 'I mean quieter than usual.' He said, clarifying his earlier remark, as he picked up and sipped his rapidly cooling coffee. She raised her left eyebrow; 'Your observation would be correct Admiral. I'm currently considering, who could be responsible for such an unprovoked attack.' Dalen sat down and opened his hands in a sweeping gesture. 'The usual suspects?' Varr said with a shrug. 'Ferengi, Breen, Romulans, Cardassians, I suppose even the Klingons aren't beyond question.' The Vulcan woman remained impassive. 'Sir I'd like to lead an investigation into the attack.' The Admiral nodded. 'Agreed!' The Vulcan looked back to her Padd. Before standing up and crossing over to the auxiliary science station at the rear of the bridge.

Aboard the USS. Searcher. 'Sir!' Lieutenant Emrah called out excitedly. The Captain almost jumped, at the sound of her voice. 'What is it?'

'That blip on the Scanner. It's back, Sir.' Captain Jackson turned her head towards tactical.

'Confirmed!' Came Ensign O'Leary's voice from the communications station. 'I'm picking up a Federation Starship entering the nebular. Sir! They're responding to our distress signal.' Captain Jackson smiled. 'On screen!' Jackson snapped to attention as she spoke, taking a deep breath. Admiral Varr's bearded face appeared on the Searcher's view screen. 'How are you Captain?' She repressed the urge to wipe a tear from her eye. 'I'm -.' She started, and then paused in thought, before continuing. 'We're fine Admiral! Thank you. Boy! Are you a sight for sore eyes.' Admiral Varr gave her an understanding nod. 'I'm preparing a four man repair crew, to beam over to you. But first, I'd like your crew to brace yourselves for towing, and we'll pull you out of the nebula.' Seconds later a bluish glow formed around the USS. Merlin's ventral Tractor-beam emitter, as a cone of energy engulfed the Searcher. The science vessel moved backwards through the nebula pulled by the larger vessel. 'Admiral!' Andrei, said as he looked up from his console to the main screen. 'Science vessel is clear from the Nebula, Admiral.' Admiral Varr gave him the A-ok gesture. As the image of the crippled ship grew larger, and larger upon the viewscreen, Andrei noticed something. 'Sir, she's had a hole blown almost clean through her.' Admiral Varr looked towards the screen concern evident on his face.

'Give me a higher magnification.' The Admiral ordered. As the Tactical officer repressed a gasp.

'Gee! You could almost fly a shuttlecraft, through a hole that size.'

'The odds were against the Searcher suffering no fatalities.' T'Pren said standing up, at her science station. 'No Kidding, Commander.' Andrei called out. The Vulcan woman turned slowly to face him.

'I have no logical reason to kid you, or to mislead you Commander. He smiled, as she turned her back on the young tactical officer. 'If it is okay with you Sir.' T'Pren asked turning back to the Admiral. 'I wish to take a team across, to start my investigation.' The Admiral nodded. 'Lieutenant Commander Sergeyevich, you are with me.' She ordered, as he followed her from the bridge. Lieutenant Sarah Walkinghorse, a woman of striking Native American appearance took his place, at the tactical rail. She stood to attention. 'Admiral!' She called to get his attention, the Trill Admiral turned to face her. 'Yes Sarah.' He replied.

'Reports from Transporter rooms two and three, both our investigation and repair teams have departed for the Searcher.' He nodded, his approval. 'And Captain Jackson has just arrived in Transporter room one, Sir.' The Admiral stood up, and after straightening his tunic he walked across the bridge to his ready-room. As the doors closed he turned back towards the Tactical rail. 'The Big chair's yours Sarah. You have the bridge. Oh, and when Captain Jackson arrives, show her straight in.' The young woman nodded as she sat down in the black Leather upholstered command chair. 'Of course Admiral!' She replied. A few minutes passed before Captain Jackson entered the bridge. Sarah stood up to greet her. 'He's in his ready-room, Captain' She gestured. 'Your to go right in.' The doors slid open and Captain Jackson left the bridge.

'Come in Captain, sit down.' Dalen said as he carefully took a pot of hot Tarkalean tea from it's warmer, and poured them both a large cup. 'My mother always told me that hot sweet Tarkalean tea was good for shock.' He said, as she picked up her cup, feeling its warmth spreading through her hands. The hot sweet liquid coursed into her throat. 'Well I've certainly had a shock, Admiral.' She said slowly, as he turned his desktop computer console around to face her. My Chief Security Officer, sent back this image from your ships sensors. Are you up to seeing the attack again?' She nodded, as she finished her first cup of tea. Dalen poured her a second. 'Thanks.' She nodded. As upon the consoles screen, a blue-black jagged

double crescent loomed up before them. Two long tubes pointed forward from a central sphere, supporting a barrel shaped command structure. Glowing amber lights, set within its surface, gave it an eerie presence that illuminated the whole of the vessel. Then without warning, a red glow expanded within a sphere set between the crescents, followed by a blinding scarlet light. Then the USS. Searcher's sensors went dead. Dalen scratched his Trill spotted forehead in a perplexed manner. 'I don't recognise it.' She shrugged, looking regretfully mystified.

'Strange thing is, neither does Starfleet command.' Dalen sighed, as he tapped a switch on his desk. 'Thankfully.' He said, as his fingers moved across his console. 'The Admiral in command of Starbase four - one - zero, is a friend of mine.' A few seconds passed, before a woman's face appeared on a screen that folded up from the surface of his desk. 'Admiral Varr, How can I help you?' She inquired politely. 'I've got a little problem, here Admiral.' Her eyes betrayed her concern.

'Problem?' She asked.

'At around 16:33 hours, two days ago the USS. Searcher, was attacked, by an unknown vessel.' The female Admiral sat forward.

'Any casualties?' She asked. Admiral Varr smiled.

'Thankfully, the only casualties apart from minor cuts and bruises, seem to be the nerves of Captain Leila Jackson and her crew. Oh, and a few dozen buckled hull plates Admiral.' Admiral Jat sighed.

'What condition is her ship in?' She inquired. Admiral Varr smiled.

'She's intact, and will be warp capable within the next hour or so. But her saucer section has been blown almost clean open. She's has a fifteen metre plus wide hole in her hull that has penetrated to a depth of about five decks.' Admiral Jat blinked.

'We can all be thankful, that no one has lost their life in this seemingly unwarranted attack.' Dalen nodded his agreement. 'We'll be arriving at Starbase four - one - zero, in about three days from now. Can you set and deploy the Starbases's repair cradle, for an Oberth class vessel.' Admiral Jat nodded.

'That shouldn't be a problem. I'll see to it, that we're ready for her.'

'Thank you for your assistance Admiral.'

'I'm also sending you some rather perplexing images, of an unknown aggressor vessel, that needs to be identified. I was wondering if you could show it around. Find out who's taken to using science vessels for target practise. I'll send you the image files, via Subspace. Any help you may be able to render us, to aid us in our investigation would be greatly appreciated.' Admiral Jat nodded, as she stared at the image of the Alien vessel.

'I'll do my best for you. See you soon. Admiral, Jat out.'

'Thank you Anarita.' Admiral Varr said as the screen went blank.

Three days later - at 18:27 Hours station time, within the circular Control room, aboard Starbase four - one - zero. Lieutenant Myers, the Station's security chief, looked up from his console. 'Sir I'm picking up two Starfleet warp signatures, approaching on an intercept heading. It's the Merlin and the Searcher.' Admiral Jat stood up and gazed at the two tiny dots on the main screen. Lieutenant Myers smiled. 'Some good news sir.' Admiral Jat turned to him. 'The USS, Searcher appears to be pretty heavily damaged, but she's holding impulse under her own power.' Admiral Anarita Jat sat back in her chair. 'That's good news indeed, Lieutenant. Thank you.'

'They should be here within the hour Admiral.'

Later that evening, in Admiral Anarita Jat's office . . .

'Well Dalen, I've checked, the entire sensor logs from both the Searcher and the Merlin. I've also spoke with the various alien Ambassadors, serving here at the

station, to find out whether they've seen a vessel like the one that attacked the USS. Searcher.' I've still to hear from Quek our Ferengi Ambassador. But our Klingon Ambassador, says that he once saw a double crescent design, similar to this, while travelling in Orion space.' Dalen scratched his head.

'Orion space, can be a little dangerous, even for a ship armed like the USS. Merlin. Do we have any other information?' He asked. Jat smiled.

'That's where I got lucky.' Admiral Jat smiled. 'I checked some restricted files, pulled for me from a Klingon Intelligence source.' Varr's eyes widened. 'Let me explain, Ambassador Ke'reth is an honourable man. When he was told of an unprovoked attack, on an almost defenceless Science vessel. It was all I could do, to stop him leading the search for the attacker himself.' Varr nodded.

'With all due respect, Admiral, surely this is an internal Federation matter.' Varr said.

'Usually I'd agree with you. But the images he showed me may have some bearing on our case. I'd like you to look at this image.' Admiral Varr looked at the screen, only to see the same double crescent shaped vessel. 'Is that it?' He asked.

'Either that, or one like it.' She said. 'It's a Taelarian Starship. The odd thing is, the Taelari, rarely venture this far from the fringes of the Orion colonies. And they've never bothered the Federation before now.' She shrugged, shaking her head slowly.

'Before you arrived Admiral. I did take the liberty of contacting Taelarius IV, they report that our Science vessel attacked their ship with a directed Polaron burst weapon, forcing them to defend themselves, from a blast which disrupted their shields and led directly to the loss of life, of more than thirty of their officers.' Anarita cupped her jaw and sighed, as she closed the file. 'I've also read your First Officer's report and found out that no such weapon existed aboard the Searcher.' Dalen Varr shrugged. 'Could someone have removed it?' He asked. Anarita Jat shook her head.

'I considered this, but an Oberth class vessel just doesn't have either the space for such a weapon, or more importantly the energy needed to fire one. And before you ask, the weapon wasn't destroyed in the explosion.' Varr paused in thought.

'That means, that there must have been another vessel in the Nebula.' Varr said, glancing up. Anarita smiled. 'I came to more or less, the same conclusion yesterday. I'm also willing to speculate that that the USS. Searcher or the Taelarians interrupted this third vessel and it was this vessel that tried to start a battle to destroy both vessels. The USS. Searcher may of unknowingly witnessed something untoward.' Dalen nodded.

'It's certainly a theory, that fits all the facts.' He said. Anarita stood up.

'I'm glad we're in agreement, Admiral, as Starfleet have given you the task of continuing your investigation into what they believe was an unwarranted attack on this Federation vessel.' Dalen took a deep breath. 'What about the Taelarians?' He asked. She smiled, as she pressed a button her desk. A young pale skinned woman dressed from head to toe in an austere black and grey flight suit, timed with scarlet piping. Entered the room. Her eyes, which had no pupils, were the colour of polished jade. Her hair hung in three waste length broad blue coloured plats braided with red ribbons. Red firestone gems marked the line of her eyebrows, and a thin indentation ran from her hairline to the bridge of her nose. Dalen stood up, more out of respect than anything else. 'She arrived just before you did. Her name is.' The woman spoke up, interrupting the Admiral. 'My name is Raya Tarika, Inquisitor, for the Regent of Taelarius IV.' I have been assigned to assist you in your investigations.' Dalen grinned. The woman's green eyes flashed. 'Good! I like an officer who is confident in herself.' Varr snapped back. The woman clicked her boot heels together, as she came to attention. Admiral Jat stood up and handed her a Federation communicator. The woman glanced to each of them. 'It's a communications device.' He said. 'It also allows you to access the systems on my ship. She Nodded. 'You ware it over your heart.' He ventured, as she turned it over in a distrusting manner between her

fingers. 'I do not think that would be appropriate as my Duo-cardial organ is not in the same place as yours appear to be.' She then placed the pin upon her chest. Admiral Jat nodded.

'We've given you temporary field commission of Lieutenant. You're to serve as Admiral Varr's mission specialist.' The Alien woman nodded, clicking her heals together. 'I wish you both luck.' Anarita said, as they turned to leave. 'Luck, as you call it Admiral, has nothing to do with it. The Inquisition has always triumphed over the guilty. It has been that way for at least, the last two thousand years!'

Two hours later. Aboard the USS. Merlin. 'You have an impressive ship Admiral Varr. Akira Class, Named for a powerful Sorcerer and advisor to a mighty Regent, in a story from ancient Earth mythology, I believe. Your vessel is 464.43 Metres long, and 316.67 metres wide. You have eighteen decks, and are armed with six type ten heavy Phaserbanks, four standard Phaserbanks, four double barrellled Quantum Torpedo launchers, fore, and two launchers aft. You are also equipped with a pair of forward firing Phased energy Gatling guns. This makes you a challenging opponent for even a Ti'Wah Class Heavy cruiser.' Admiral Varr smiled.

'I'm impressed, you've really done your homework.' She looked confused. 'It means, you've taken the time to learn about us, and that you have an excellent memory. He continued, by way of an explanation, the woman nodded. 'But what's a Ti'Wah Class Heavy cruiser?' He asked.

'It is the type of ship that your science vessel, should not have willingly fired upon.' He nodded as he watched her place her single item of luggage in her assigned quarters. 'Your shuttlecraft has been taken to a secure shuttlebay.' He told her. She nodded, her understanding. 'Are your quarters adequate?' He asked. She nodded. 'You don't talk much do you?' He probed with his question. She turned to face him. 'I have vary little to say at this time.' She spoke the words, like she was quoting them from a book. When she had settled in, the Admiral led her to the Turbolift. 'Bridge!' At his command the Turbolift moved smoothly upward.

The two of them stepped out onto the Bridge, all the officers present stood to attention, as Starfleet Commander T'Pren's gaze passed over them. 'All Officers present and correct Sir! The Vulcan reported. The USS. Merlin is ready to depart.' The Admiral zipped up his collar the last two inches. 'Then Let's get underway then. Helm; prepare to leave space dock, as soon as we're clear of the station. Then set course for the Orion Nebula warp eight.' Admiral Varr then gestured to the woman standing beside him. 'Crew, this is Lieutenant Raya Tanika, our new mission specialist.' The woman stepped forward, as Admiral Varr continued his introductions. Lieutenant Tanika, this is my first officer Commander T'Pren of Vulcan. The man behind you at the tactical rail is Lieutenant Commander Andrei Sergeyeovich, beside him is Lieutenant Sarah Walkinghorse.' Raya nodded to each in turn, as Admiral Varr continued his introductions. 'At the Helm we have Ensign Saril,' Saril was a Deltan; her head was as smooth as billiard ball, a natural trait for this empathic species. 'At the Operations console we have our Betazoid Ops. Officer Lieutenant Talyn Zawahl.' The dark haired man looked around, and smiled at the sound of his name. The Admiral gestured to a chair beside his. Raya sat down, as did the other Officers. The Inquisitor looked at the Betazoid, then to the Deltan. 'How do you grade and regulate your Telepaths.' The Admiral's eyes seemed to widen in barely contained surprise. 'I'm not sure, that I understand the question.' Dalen asked. A she stared at him.

'I meant no offence, it's just on my Homeworld, telepaths are marked.' He blinked, in shock. She turned to him. You surround yourself with races that are known to be naturally telepathic. Vulcans, Betazoids, Deltans, even Trills share a telepathy with the slugs within them.' Dalen scratched his head. As he stood up, from his command chair, which he'd only just, sat down in. 'Lieutenant!' He said, irritably. 'I'd like to

continue this conversation into my Ready-room.' As the doors closed behind them, he turned to face her. 'I don't believe the bridge of a Starship, is the place for this conversation.' He said, as he stood beside his desk. 'And for your information, we don't use the word Slug, to describe our Symbiotic relationship. If you must mention it at all, then the acceptable term for the creature within some Trills, myself included, is Symbiont.' She tried to conceal her reaction.

'I'm sorry if I've offended you Admiral.' He gave her a reassuring shrug of his shoulders as he sat down. 'I was always brought up to respect Telepaths.' He explained. 'You seem to fear them, you talk of marking them, ostracising them.' He said, in a probing manner. She stood to attention.

'The Regent says that, it is mental disorder!' He lowered his voice to a hushed tone.

'You said that they marked telepaths, marked them how?' He asked. A note of concern, was evident in his voice. 'We rarely speak of it with outsiders. But they remove the Otalomic ridge, to warn others that we can read their minds.' He ran his finger around the inside of his collar.

'But some of them can still read minds. Can't they?' He ventured. She nodded sadly.

'On a planet, where such abilities are outlawed. And those who show any sign of this ability are considered as dangerous, feared, hated and even executed. Our problem is, that for a tiny percentage of the Taelarian people, the removal of their ridge opens their mind.' He sat forward.

'You mean, that some of them become more telepathic?' She nodded.

'Admiral, I have something to tell you.' Dalen smiled disarmingly. She took a deep breath before speaking, in a slow and practised manner. 'I believe that the vessel that attacked your ship, was a Regency Patrol ship, hunting the Dria'ahl. I believe that this patrol-ship attacked your science vessel in error, while hunting down the enemies of the Regent.' Dalen smiled.

'I think that I'm beginning to understand this situation. You're one of them, aren't you?' She looked shocked. 'I wish!' She exclaimed. 'I wish that I'd had the courage, to come out as a Dria'ahl.' Dalen handed her a box of tissues from his desk drawer, and gestured for her to continue. 'I was halfway through my first year at the Taelarian Security Academy, when I found out that I was becoming a telepath. So I did the right thing, I handed myself in to the authorities. So I could be corrected.'

'You did what society expected.' Dalen said softly, as he put his hand lightly on her shoulder. Tears welled up in her Emerald eyes. 'I should have stood up, to the State! Joined the Dria'ahl movement. Most of them just want to live somewhere without the fear of persecution.' The Admiral allowed her head to fall upon his shoulder, as he put his arm around her. 'We'll be entering the Orion Nebula in a little over two days.' Dalen said softly. 'Then we'll try and find these Dria'ahls.' She nodded. 'I'll also need as much information on your people, as you can give me.'

'We don't, as a rule, discuss such matters as family or Politics, with outsiders.'

'I'll have to know as much, as you can tell me. If I'm to help you.'

Later on that night aboard Starbase four - one - zero . . .

Admiral Jat had just poured herself a cup of sweet tea, when her desk console beeped its incoming call tone. She put her cup down and opened the console. She saw Admiral Varr calmly looking at her. 'Is there a problem Admiral?' She asked, he nodded.

'I'm not sure, whether this is a problem. But it certainly counts as a complication.' Anarita sat forward in her chair, her elbows on her desk, 'You have my undivided attention Admiral.'

'It's the Taelarians, they're part way through a civil war, no one seems to talk about.' Anarita looked puzzled. 'They're persecuting all their planet's telepaths.' Dalen

continued, as he shook his head sadly. 'They've been doing it for hundreds of years.' Anarita's eyes widened.

'That hardly makes it right Admiral.' Dalen Varr nodded in agreement.

'I agree with you in principle, that its wrong Admiral Varr. But the Prime Directive clearly states -.' Admiral Varr sighed. 'I know the what the Prime Directive states Admiral?' He said sadly. 'While teaching at the Academy I did a semester of teaching Ethics, as they stand in respect of the Prime Directive. These people are being systematically hunted down, forced to undergo surgery, or even killed. There's got to be a way to help these people. Help me find a loophole that unties my hands from the Prime Directive.' She rubbed her brow. 'You realise what you're asking.' She asked.

'They need help!' He said. 'If we could aid them somehow.' She paused in thought.

What if the, - What did you call them?' She asked.

'The Dria'ahl.' He replied.

'What if the Dria'ahl were to claim asylum, aboard your vessel?' She asked.

'I'm no legal expert, but I imagine that there would have to be an inquiry.' Varr guessed.

'Here aboard the Starbase?' She smiled.

'Are you saying that, if the Dria'ahl, ask for asylum, aboard the Merlin. Then an inquiry would have to be held. An inquiry on neutral ground for both the Dria'ahl and the Taelarians.' He asked with a grin.

'Which would mean, it could be held aboard your Starbase.' He said, with a grin. She nodded.

'Continue your investigation Admiral, and keep me informed.' Admiral Jat out . . .'

As they spoke the Merlin rocked, from an explosion, T'Pren's voice came through the intercom. 'Admiral to the bridge!' He stood up and moved swiftly across his ready room. 'What's happening?' He snapped at no one in particular. Lieutenant Commander Sergeyeovich glanced up. 'It's a Ti'Wah Class Heavy cruiser, ordering us to leave Taelarian space. Raya Tanika stood up and approached the screen as the blue/black crescent turned to face them. Admiral Varr joined her. 'Who's vessel is it Dria'ahl, Or Regency?' He asked. 'I'm not sure!' She said, as another blast rocked their shields. 'Shields at seventy eight percent, and holding Admiral! They're playing for keeps.' Came Andrei's voice from tactical. 'Andrei!' The Admiral smiled, glancing back at tactical. 'Let's return fire Andrei, aim for their weapons ports.' The Merlin's phased energy Gatling guns tore at the alien vessel's shields, as a panel opened on underside of the Taelarian vessel's hull. A searing bolt of neon blue energy grazed the Merlin's upper surface. Andrei called out from his tactical rail. 'Admiral, I think they're getting playful. If that last shot had got through our shields, it would have been hot enough to boil us to plasma.' Admiral Varr smiled. 'The game's over Andrei, give them both barrels.' The blond man nodded, as his fingers tapped on his targeting console. An amber flash smashed into the Ti'Wah Class vessels hull, sending it spinning as a quantum torpedo ripped through the alien vessels starboard warp nacelle. Lieutenant Zerah Telo, the Merlin's Andorian duty communications officer spoke up. 'That got their attention Admiral, they're asking to speak with you.' He stood up, as an angry woman with a ridged face stared at him with barely concealed hate. 'Federation Vessel, you have committed an act of war!' The Admiral smiled.

'Look here! if anyone has committed an act of hostility, it was yourselves who opened fire on my vessel. Just be thankful, that I'm not a vindictive man. Otherwise I'd have put my torpedo straight through your bridge.' The communication ceased, as the alien vessel turned and limped away at low impulse. 'Admiral, we have a second crescent shaped vessel hailing us.' Dalen nodded.

'On screen.' The image of a middle aged woman filled the screen. 'Federation Starship, I am Sehval of the Dria'ahl, welcome to Taelarian space. Thank you for chasing off, that Regency patrol ship for us.' Dalen shrugged. 'They opened fire on us, so we warned them off. We're not her to take sides.' She nodded as she looked past him towards Raya. 'Daughter.' Raya looked up, and seemed to be holding back tears. 'Mother, I didn't know you were here.'

'I see your still dressed as one of the Regent's bullies.' The older woman scorned. 'At least I'm not shooting up, other peoples science vessels!' She retorted. 'The Federation could wipe out our Home-fleet out in a matter of hours. There are dozens of their ships equal, and some a damn site more powerful than this one, out there.' The older woman's eyes narrowed.

'We didn't open fire on anybody.' She snapped back angrily. Admiral Varr rubbed his brow, a nervous habit, and an action that he almost immediately regretted. 'Ladies, There's no need, for an argument here!' He sighed.

'Sehval Tanika, can you bring the Dria'ahl to a neutral meeting place?' She looked shocked. 'Why?' She asked accusingly. 'From what your daughter tells me, your people are seeking a free Homeworld, away from persecution.' The Woman nodded. 'If only it were that simple. What we want, is the Regent to acknowledge the Dria'ahl's right to exist on our own Homeworld.' Dalen looked from mother to daughter and back as Raya moved forward.

'Mother, listen! The Federation have a proven track record for settling disputes. If you can bring the Dria'ahl to the coordinates which we're transmitting.' The older woman shook her head.

'So many people have died for the most basic right to exist. I'm not sure that they can just be forgotten.' Raya shook her head. 'We're not asking for them to be forgotten mother!' She said, her voice taking on a note of conciliation. 'If their mistreatment can be brought out in the open, even the Regent will have to face our right to exist.' Admiral Varr sat down, as Sehval turned to her crew.

'Take the Dria'ahl To this Starbase four – one – zero. He say's we'll be safe there. And he believes it. So I want you to go there and await my return.'

Dalen Varr took a deep breath, before speaking. 'I'd like a word with this Regent of yours.' She looked a little shocked. 'And Sehval!' He said, as she locked eyes with him, as they spoke. 'I'd like you to join us.' Three hours passed while Dalen spoke with the Taelarians, learning more of their history. As the USS. Merlin approached Taelarius IV, as a pair of Regency patrol ships approached them. 'This Is Admiral Dalen Varr of the United Federation of Planets. I request a meeting with Regent of Taelarius IV.'

'Follow us, Federation Vessel. It is not your desire to see the Regent, that matters, the Regent wants to see you!'

Taelarius IV was a warm class M planet; it's deep blue oceans and shallow coral seas, sandy shores and rich green forests. Seen from orbit four major settlements stood out, on the Northern continent, the Largest of which was Taelor. Admiral Varr stood up and motioned for T'Pren to take his chair. 'Andrei, Sarah your with me. Let's go see this Regent.' A cool breeze broke the still evening air, as the Federation officers arrived. Varr glanced up at the red tinged moons as they were led through tree lined gardens; Andrei nodded to the Security sensors within the bushier of the trees. 'This Regent sure loves his Privacy.' Sarah shook her head.

'Her.' she whispered, Andrei smiled.

'You think?' He asked in a hushed tone. She pointed to the leather clad guards.

'Both ship Captains, all the armed guards we've seen are women. Men seem to have, shall we say a secondary role in this society.' He grinned, as they were led

through another door, and into an entrance hall. Then after several rooms and corridors, they found themselves standing before a raised dais, topped with a throne. All the guards here were also female, it seemed Sarah had been right. The Regent looked about 16 standard years old, she was flanked by two of the fiercest female warriors any of them had ever seen. Both stood stiffly in form fitting red ablative armour, each wore a matching black helmet with its faceplate darkly tinted. She stood up causing her scarlet robes to open in a petal-like display, revealing the same utilitarian black leather one-piece catsuits that the guards wore. 'You have some gall, Admiral. I could have you all executed were you stand for attacking a Starship, of the Regent of Taelarius IV.' The Admiral stepped forward, and made a slight bowing motion.

'Your excellency, I believe there has been a greater injustice here.' She nodded.

'There has. And you've played your part. You've managed to put all those Dria'ahl fools in one place. As we speak, my forces are on an intercept Heading. Dalen nodded, as he spoke.

'I thought you might try something foolish. So I brought myself a little insurance.' She looked concerned. 'Explain!' she barked. He nodded.

'To put it simply, your fear of Telepaths, was your undoing.' He said slowly. She stepped forward her guards aiming their lance-like energy weapons towards him as he spoke. 'I have a number of Telepaths under my command. And they felt your open hostility, your need to rid yourself of the only people who could ever betray you.' The Regent looked slightly concerned, as she tried to hide her emotions. He pushed his advantage. 'I know your little secret.' He mocked.

'I don't know what you're talking about.' She hissed. 'You're bluffing!' She almost snapped, as he smiled. 'What do you think you know, off-worlder?' She asked, as she pulled and toyed with a small ornate copper bladed dagger, in a threatening manner.

'WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU KNOW!' She shouted.

'Oh go on Regent!' The Admiral mocked her. 'Why don't you just read my mind, to find out what I know? You can read minds can't you?' Her eyes narrowed. She looked absolutely horrified.

'Guards! Kill them.' She snarled. Her guards raised their weapons. They suddenly froze in their tracks, as Sehval entered the room, Dressed in robes of the Regent. 'Guards! You will lower your weapons!' They complied almost instantly. Sarah looked to the Admiral. 'How did you know?' She asked.

'I played a hunch, based on a few things that have been bothering me, ever since I met Sehval. Raya had given me some old image files. One was of this room, the Regent's throne room. I noticed that the portrait hanging behind the throne of the Regent looked a lot like a younger version of our friend Raya Tanika' Sarah looked up.

'Sibling rivalry?' She asked. Dalen nodded. Sarah looked a little shocked, as she shook her head.

'I didn't always get on with my sister, but I didn't start no revolution.' Sarah joked. Andrei stepped forward. 'Sir what about, the Dria'ahl war fleet?' Admiral Varr grinned. 'They'll be fine! Three Federation Vessels led by the USS. London, are racing to Rendezvous with them. So they'll be quite safe from attack.'

Sehval strode towards the raised podium. She gestured for two guards to remove the young Regent's cloak of office. Suddenly the once regal teen, fell almost sobbing into her mother's arms. Sehval cradled her daughter. Mia'ahl, You will remain silent, while I speak to these brave Federation people.' Mia'ahl moved to leave. But first you will order your guards and starships, to stand down. And turn themselves in.' She nodded, her hold on her society broken, by her mother's return.

'Admiral!' She said; it's difficult to know, what to say at a time like this. Believe me when I tell you, that I've practised my returning speech, countless times, only to now be struck dumb.' He smiled.

'It happens, like that sometimes.'

'So I'll try to explain. Our culture is due in part to our history, as it is I'm sure for many worlds. Long ago, before this planet adopted it's current ways, there was a devastating war, mass chemical Genocide. Both sides attempted to wipe each other out with chemical bombs. We didn't realise until it had become too late that our water supply had been poisoned and our plants wouldn't grow as crops. And worse than that, most of our population had been rendered sterile. Our scientists tried to repair the damage. But only succeeded in creating a drone class, our males were almost emotionless hulks, strong and aggressive, but without the intelligence to complete the simplest task. We fell in to the habit of using them, as a labour force to rebuild our world. Over the years we improved them, selectively bred out their aggressive tendencies. Performed surgery on their brains, taught the best of them to communicate. But they never managed to rise much above animal.' Sarah stepped forward. 'Didn't I notice a man serving aboard the Dria'ahl vessel?' Andrei nodded.

'She's right Admiral. There was a man serving on that Vessel.' Sehval sighed. She closed her eyes slowly, before speaking. 'It's a religious issue; the Dria'ahl discovered that, males could be healed by Telepathic healing techniques. In time they became intelligent enough to serve as our equals. We educated and trained them. Some of our Officers even took them as their mates. They conceived and gave birth to naturally healthy children, both male and female. Around one thousand years ago we contacted the Priest class that had persecuted us, and tried to reconcile our differences. We told them of our healing techniques. Only to find out that their scientists, had started to breed from specially selected females, creating children in their labs.' Since then, they have been an all female society. Their men are kept simple. Their men work in the fields, and fish the seas and mine their minerals. They are their slave labour class.' The now defrocked Regent, started to sob again.

'Please don't judge us. It's the way of things I'm afraid, that our men are born retarded; some of them are little more than animals. We agree that its due unknown chemicals in our worlds soil that does it. The same chemicals, that gives Dria'ahls their dangerous abilities. Our religion Admiral, forbids the use of Telepathy, it is our greatest Taboo.' She moaned. 'They embraced, ways contrary to our religion. How can you trust someone who can read your thoughts Admiral?' He stepped forwards.

'You learn to be honest, and truthful with them. It's tricky at first. But after a while you learn to accept them.'

'That's not our way!' She said, angrily. 'Our Scientists have learned to breed females in our labs.' Her mother silenced her with a glance.

'Over the years, I've been away Admiral, it seems that some kind of madness has befallen my people.' Sehval said slowly. 'Then came the Dark-times, when the Priest-cast took over. Bringing my youngest daughter to power. In that time of fear, they murdered and mutilated anyone who showed any outward sign of being Dria'ahl.' He nodded, trying to take it all in, as she continued. 'You see, the word Dria'ahl, in our language means ungodly or evil. We fled our homes during the persecution, taking their word of hate, as our name. Stealing their ships for our own, some which were barely spaceworthy. This all happened almost two thousand years ago.' His eyes widened. She smiled. 'My kind are cursed with a long lifespan of pain. We became old, but we did not become wise. We became so arrogant, in believing that younger races couldn't possibly help us. So we became the isolationist and divided fools, that you see before you.' He lowered his gaze.

'To think this all started with a damaged science vessel.' Admiral Varr muttered, as he sadly shook his head. 'That explains the likeness. Between you and your daughters. You're all clones of the original survivors aren't you?' She nodded sadly. Sarah spoke up.

'That also explains the madness, you cloned your own illnesses, and psychological problems into the next generation.' Sehval nodded.

'You are very wise young woman. A strange and rare commodity here.' Sehval lowered her voice as she spoke. Admiral Varr glanced around the room as he thought . . .

'Perhaps the Federation could help your people. We have many wonderful scientists from many of our member worlds. Perhaps in time they could help you rebuild your world.' The new Regent wiped a tear from her eye. 'We thought of all other races of the galaxy, as children.' The Admiral stepped forward ignoring Starfleet protocol, and put his arm around her left shoulder. 'Sometimes, it takes a child's words, to tell us how foolish we've become in our later years. She nodded. Dalen hugged her. 'There's an old phrase that's sometimes used within the Federation.' She looked up into his eyes. 'From the mouth's of babes.' He said slowly. . 'From the mouth's of babes.'