

DW 179

an Outpost Hope One short novel
written by Caleb, Devon, and Richard

Star Trek: Borderlands

<http://www.startrekborderlands.com>

Located near the Delta Quadrant terminus of the Geroch Wormhole lies one of the Federation's greatest centers of scientific and engineering research. Sentinel Station hovers above one aperture of the Hope One Dyson Sphere; an ancient construct enclosing a white dwarf star and having an interior surface equivalent to millions of worlds. No greater engineering marvel has ever been known.

Star Trek: Borderlands is a play-by-email roleplaying community started in 1993. For more than 20 years, fans of Star Trek have come together to write their own stories of exploration, conflict, friendship, victory and defeat. Outpost Hope One welcomes anyone looking to explore the edge of human understanding in the fields of engineering, physical sciences and humanities.

This short novel is a compilation of posts from the [Outpost Hope One Posting Group](#)¹. The prologue is a compilation of posts from the [DFA Cromwell Posting Group](#)².

¹ <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/SentinelStation/info>

² <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/cromwell/info>

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Prologue

The communication video activated. A medical hologram appeared. Eiwan recognized the Engineering uniform.

"Chief Engineer Eiwan. I feel I was unable to answer all the questions you had at the time of my talk." began DW 179. At least she would have to presume it was the same DW 179. They truly all did look alike. "I would like to be assured that you have had your questions answered sufficiently and to your satisfaction."

"I appreciate the opportunity. I believe you are a sentient being." The fact that sentience of photonic beings was debated gave credence to the claim. "I don't know what sort of definitive proof there can be. The nature of evolution is still debated, centuries after the concept was introduced on my world."

"Evolution may be the best argument for being considered alive. Just as the definition of a species changes through time, with new features, and fits and starts, and dead ends, I think we may just be an evolutionary seedling which may or may not thrive in this galaxy at this time. It depends if others will let us grow, or pull us out by the roots." Said DW.

"That is a reasonable argument. Do you believe others, such as Commander Chak, can be persuaded by such an argument?" Eiwan did not want to argue against sentience but it would be willful ignorance to accept the photonic's argument at face value.

"No. I do not think people like commander Chak will admit what they really feel. He led circular arguments until he came around to his own involvement with a photonic. I think there is more to that story than was revealed that afternoon. And, it is my opinion, it frightened him." said DW.

"I concede the point." Eiwan hesitated. "May I ask a delicate question?"

"You may." said DW. The prospect did not seem to frighten him outwardly. In someways, he had a strain of vulcan underlying his emotions.

"Do you consider yourself alive?"

"I am alive." said DW. Not, 'I consider myself alive.' "Does that frighten you?"

"No. You've given me no reason to be afraid."

"It does some. We have abilities and skills that cannot be matched by most organics." said DW. "But we have vulnerabilities at the other extreme, vulnerabilities that would not be a threat to organics."

"We are all individuals. Even amongst organics there is a range of capability."

"We is not better or worse, it is just... different. Not unlike any other alien species that explorers have encountered." said DW. "Cryosian, Tholian...There are some that would not fit the definition of alive, even in current culture. But no one argues with those species if they are alive.

"The Tholians were accepted as alive fairly readily. By their actions, they were deemed sentient and the matter of them being alive by the standard definition was discussed much later." Eiwan had read some of the arguments on both sides. Some still held to a definition that Tholians are not alive. "Perhaps because photonic beings have been directly created by organics, it puts in the position of having to defend their claim of life and sentience."

"Much the way a clone would have to defend themselves from becoming organ harvesting bodies, that would cause their own death?" asked DW.

"I don't believe there is the language to describe your existence as alive. Your personality can be copied like any other subroutine. The nature of your reproduction is not particularly different than organics. Our DNA is copied and pasted into the precursor of a living cell. Humans and other species have managed to edit the genome into augmented individuals. I can code my favourite holonovel into a genetic sequence that can be read back as easily as a set of isolinear rods. The idea of your replication can be as mundane as sharing an image amongst friends. You and I understand the scale of the latter versus the former."

DW gave a slightly wry grin. "Using that logic, you are not alive either. You can be cloned, just as my subroutines can be copied." said DW. "As for my personality, each of us seem to have a similiar, but different personality despite the same subroutines, a lot like twins I would venture."

"True. Perhaps I am splitting hairs when it comes to defining and differentiating your form of replication from my own." It was a much bigger topic than Eiwan and DW 179 could discuss in an evening. "You do reproduce. You, yourself, are not the same individual as the original EMH that we can consider your ancestor.

"That is true." said DW, he hoped her insight would lead her to the conclusion he desired.

"I will not deny your evolution, growth and adaptation. I consider it self-evident." Eiwan brushed those aside as previously decided.

"The sticking point would be homeostasis. You do not have a self-contained internal environment."

"Holodeck computers do not count as my environment?" said DW 179.

"No." Eiwan replied.

"Then when I am active, in your environment on the holodeck, the fact that I have holoemitters maintaining my form, and computers maintaining my programming, that is not homeostasis?" asked DW. "Surely, the opposite of homeostasis would be entropy, which I would disintegrate into small bits of photons and electrical signal. Is that different than you stepping out into space, or beaming onto the surface of a class K planet with Toxic Gas and acid atmosphere? The fact that I maintain my programming, from day to day, from hour to hour, from second to second in a hostile environment should argue for homeostasis of my being."

"You are alive now or not. Life is not something that can be deferred to the advancement of technology." Eiwan stumbled onto a sticking point that she could not simply cede to DW 179.

"Perhaps you could compare to a virus?" asked DW. "A virus is considered alive."

"A virus? Is it? A virus is nothing more than a collection of chemical processes. And, viruses have changed over time but not in billions of years have virii grown into something different. You cannot provide me with evidence that a virus can become a bacterium. Bacteria is the simplest form of life. Are you a bacteria?" Eiwan challenged DW 179. A computer program could mimic every facet of life except homeostasis. That didn't necessarily make DW 179 and the other photonics something other than alive. Could it be the only argument photonics could not overcome?

"You may be confusing a Prion with a Virus. And I am clearly not a bacterium." said DW. "Any more than humans descended from 'apes'." said DW. "But if you track backwards, earth primates and

Homo sapiens had a common ancestor. The genetic difference between Chimpanzees and humans is less than 3%, and that is only after approximately 2 million years of genetic drift and mutations." said DW. "And if you track further backwards, you can see that all life on earth came from the original genetic material seeded by the ancient ancestors. But we also have life that spontaneously arose from other sources. Ice concentrating nucleotide proteins, which propagated, and replicated. Primordial 'soups' allowing for the mixing of nucleotides. That you cannot explain what life in a sentient being such as a Soong Android, or a hologram such as myself, does not make it any less real."

"As for viruses being the same since billions of years ago, they mutate constantly even over the course of months to years. Their basic make up is the same, but the proteins are constantly changing." said DW. "That is why, even in the 25th century, Medical progress and EMHs have not been able to cure the common cold. Until we can predict what mutations will occur, I do not believe we will cure the cold virus. Likewise, if we are capable of doing that, we will understand life, and be able to predict when, and how, life will occur, and this would not be a discussion." said DW dryly.

"You're obfuscating the argument. I believe you evolve, that you have emergent behaviours not specifically programmed." Eiwan wanted to redirect the discussion back to the point DW seemed to avoid. "You claim the holodeck as your environment. Homeostasis is the condition of being your own environment. The holodeck is to photonics what the arboreal forests are to my people. We each reside within our respective environments."

"Less obfuscation than there is not a defined sense of what is alive. If there were specific parameters, it would be easy to ascertain if I fit the criteria and would be considered alive." said DW.

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"Are you saying that your classification as life is not foremost in your mind?" Eiwan certainly considered DW 179 sentient but circled back to the distinction of a sentient being that was not alive.

That brought pause to DW. "I do not think being alive or sentient is the most important distinction. Being free would have to be the most important distinction."

"And what is your position on your own sentience, then?"

"I believe I am sentient, therefore I must be." said DW. "Voltare?"

"I suppose it is." Eiwan believed DW 179 and the other photonic beings were sentient. She had considered them alive. Captain Sesgaard and the crew of Cromwell-B clearly considered them alive. They had been allowed to... live their own lives. "What does it mean to you, DW 179, to be free, then?"

The question brought up DW 179 short. He had not considered his own personal freedom beyond the policies set forth by the DFA. What did it mean for DW 179 to be free? "I have not considered it at length." he finally admitted. "But I would think, on initial review, I would have the freedom to pursue what I feel is best for myself, as long as it did not interfere with another's freedom."

"And being aboard Cromwell fulfills that desire?" Again, Eiwan wasn't sure how much personification of a photonic being was proper. She smiled inwardly to herself. She personified trees so what was so wrong about personifying a hologram.

That was an easier question to answer. "Cromwell provides a safe environment for all holograms to pursue their own definition of freedoms."

"And others in your community feel the same?"

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DW did not like the answer he would provide, running it through his miscommunications matrix. But he could not answer in another way. Did his programming limit his imagination? Was he then, not alive? "I believe they do."

"Cromwell has become the home for your photonic community." mused Eiwan. These were the founders of their own culture. There had been a single generation before DW 179, that of the EMH from which they diversified. She had learned the myths of Earth's Ancient Greece. Several of their deities sprung from the cleft head of another, fully formed. These photonics came from the mind of another, fully formed.

The concerns the 'quirky' DW 179 had about discussing this so openly with Eiwan fell to the side with her question. "There are a few holograms who may be able to make the transition to outside Cromwell." DW 250 immediate came to mind. He had a curiosity that almost rivalled DW 179's quirkiness of anxiety. "Freedom and safety, while both are important, are not equal. If a hologram requested to leave, knowing the dangers of doing to, he would have the freedom to do so, if he so requested." That was freedom then, thought DW 179.

"Would you leave the community aboard Cromwell, given the opportunity?" asked Eiwan.

Chapter One

Eiwan looked up from her desktop. "DW 250?"

"Please state the nature of the Engineering problem." said DW 250 dutifully. He was wearing a DFA engineering uniform, and no visible rank which would be in line with an engineering crewman.

"Hi." Eiwan beamed. "I've given your program access to holomitters throughout the station. That is, except for sensitive sections such as Sick Bay, Main Engineering, C-and-C." She had to remember that this photonic being was not a member of Starfleet, not even of the Federation. She had granted the same access of any civilian with a few exceptions. Civilians never had access to her office.

DW 250 looked around. "Wow. Shiny." said DW. "The expense and quality are very nice in Starfleet." he said admiring the construction. "Any reason to limit my access?"

"This is a Starfleet outpost, a military installation. There are rules."

DW nodded. "I understand. You do not trust me." He still looked around in wonder though. "There are a lot of new places for me to go, even with the restrictions." said DW. Like a child he was full of many questions. "This place is huge. Does Starfleet build all it's own bases on this scale? Why doesn't it build the Joint command ventures on this scale? Is it a security issue for Starfleet? Are they concerned the DFA would hijack the base? They did so with the original Cromwell which formed the core of the DFA Rebellion."

Eiwan hadn't expected rapid-fire questions from the photonic being. "This is a large-scale station; the first built in the Delta Quadrant shortly after the wormhole was mapped and declared stable. There is a diplomatic attache from the Delta Freedom Alliance but, no, no joint venture." Eiwan hadn't considered the

scale difference between Sentinel and Horizon II. "Relations between the Federation and the Alliance are peaceful; I don't believe Starfleet Command considers a rebellion likely. If you want to see something in particular, just ask."

"It's not like I am a tourist here, just wandering about." said DW. "I expect there are some duties I could perform for you, to help out when I can."

"I would like your viewpoint on something." Eiwan and Ariana had met with Al'Rasgal of Copernicus Corporation and it was clear he hadn't been the cause of the catastrophic memory core failure aboard Sentinel. His pair of Bynar technicians provided a layer of security and redundancy that Eiwan found excessive. He was a very cautious man. Evidence pointed to Orion-coded subroutines that hijacked system-to-system translation and systematically deleted stored information. At a critical mass, the entire memory core collapsed plunging the station into proverbial darkness. A photonic being provided a unique perspective on the station's computer systems. "I'd like you to sift through the evidence from our recent memory core failure, see if there is anything that my team may have missed."

Eiwan glanced down at her padd, responded to a few inquiries from her staff, adjusted assignments and returned her attention to the photonic being in her office.

"I would be happy to." said DW. "Is there anything you would like me to look for specifically?"

"There is." Eiwan paused, looked at the photonic. "DW 250. Is that a name you prefer to be called?" Eiwan knew the origin of the designation had been one of the original programmers concatenated with an index and that some had taken on personal names rather than the next designation in sequence.

"DW is fine." said DW 250. "There are no other DW series on Sentinel station, so my Number is, well, Irrelevant at this time."

"DW." Eiwan smiled. Her discretion as chief of engineering and permission by Commander Ares allowed her to bring DW 250 aboard. It was unlikely more photonic beings would come aboard. "Where does the abbreviation come from?"

"Daignault Williams 250." said DW. "Daignault was the name given to the first engineering hologram by the chief of Engineering on Cromwell at the time. She has since passed on." said DW using the euphemism for dieing. Organic beings seemed sensitive to the subject. Much like the holograms were about discussing the purge, when a great number of their programs were deleted from the databanks. "I don't think she realized she was naming us at the time. Then with scores of Daignaults running around, we used the numbering system the EMHs utilized to differentiate themselves for delegation of duties. In researching the problem of too many Daignaults, we found references to the old Terran empire of Britain using numbering for their army of Williams, which they had too many of. So we adopted Williams as our 'last name'." said DW. Eiwan's look suggested he had spoken too long. "Yes, Just call me DW."

Eiwan appreciated the borrowed name. In human culture, individuals often named things after themselves. In her own culture, names came from lengthy description. Her own name, Eiwan, meant 'wanderer'. It had been given to her as a child. It stuck with her, almost a foretelling her leaving her home planet in favour of joining Starfleet. "My official name in Starfleet records is 'Eiwan'. Amongst my own people, it is 'la ee ki ewe la wiwi'e sheipenan'. It was given to me because I was always walking and playing along the river as a child." They would each use each other's short names but it was important to her that they knew each other's long names as well.

"You were going to tell me what you wanted me to look for in the computer core?" prompted DW. "I would like you to examine the failed memory cores within the station. I've granted you access." Eiwan had stepped to the edge of her clearance. She trusted the photonic being. She knew that even the access she had granted was beyond the norm. "I want to know of any data you find that could be a cause, a link of any sort. Any leads you find will be an incredible help."

"I can do that." said DW. And he was silent.

Eiwan turned to her padd. Most of the contact from her team leads were routine updates. Work maintaining the station progressed, more or less, on schedule. Eiwan glanced at DW. He was perfectly still. It was an odd sensation. His gaze and position of his mouth were exactly where he left off his last sentence. Eiwan shifted her chair a couple of inches to the left so that she wasn't directly in the photonic's view and continued her work. A crewman on the afternoon shift had done something stupid and ended up in Sickbay at the hands on his girlfriend.

She placed her padd flat on the desk with more force than she intended. The sound was particularly sharp in the room. "DW?"

DW seemed to shake himself. "Yes Chief?"

"I don't mean to pester, but, I expected you to begin your assignment immediately. Did you need something? Do you have a question?"

"I was just in there." said DW. "While my program resides within the holomatrix, you have provided connections that allow my program to reach out and perform the examination without moving my physical representation. Shall I continue?"

"Of course." Eiwan should have known better. Corporeal crew members left the room when they were assigned tasks. It made perfect sense that a photonic being remained still when there was no need to adjust its visual representation. "My staff don't usually do their work while standing in my office."

"Chief?" DW questioned. Had he done something wrong?

"You are welcome sit at an Engineering workstation if you prefer to remain... visible during your duties." Eiwan wasn't sure if DW had remained visible for her benefit or whether Cromwell's corridors were inhabited by dozens of perfectly still photonic beings.

"Ah, yes of course." Said DW. "I shall find an unoccupied station." DW Looked around for the Door and after quickly peering outside to confirm it was an actual exit from the chief's office, he proceeded out into main engineering, looking aournd, and continued to find his way into uncharted territory. Eiwan monitored the holographic emitters as DW moved through Engineering. His interface with the station's holographic system was flawless. For now, DW's program was still housed on the holocube provided by Lieutenant Jinx aboard Cromwell. There didn't seem to be any need to transition the program to Sentinel's own memory core. In fact, with the inexplicable cascade failure, it was prudent to keep DW safe by isolation.

Chapter Two

Binary, Hexadecimal. DW was familiar with a variety of languages. But when he started coming across, seemingly random number sequences his curiosity grew. He had heard of cryptographic techniques that utilized numbers buried within other codes to carry messages. Perhaps this was a form of this? He began tracking the numbers. First prime numbers, then sequences, and noting increasing numbers around various plots of data.

As frequency of numbers began forming outside of expected probabilities DW noted them. What were the significance of the numbers? Accessing a data base he cross indexed them with various life forms, checking for cultural significance. Whether conscious or unconscious, species would add or avoid certain numbers. It was called luck. The only value DW cared about was the p value where statistical variation became significant.

Two clusters were being repeated; 40,41,42 and 498, 499, 500. Various other tirads of number began arising. But beyond random numbers, they themselves did not seem to mean anything.

DW checked the progress of all his searches. Common data bases pointed out a variety of Alpha, Beta and Delta quadrant species where numbers played a significant role in their lives. Other more commonly known races continued to reference numbers, such as humans aversion to the numbers 5 and 13 (mostly within the subspcies, or 'races' of humans). There was an insectoid race that lived in an asteroid field not far from the Alpha/Beta quadrant border which viewed the number 16 as religious. A reptilian species distantly related to the Gorn only lay eggs in batches of 23. The Klingons had memorials that referenced both 75 and 82 (number of days in whichever war the memorial was for).

Then a potential clue DW spotted. It was an unusual string of binary characters. It was binary, but it made little sense, until it looked like

a second binary string, slightly shifted, was overlaid on top of the first. That was a revelation. That was Binar coding. DW began looking for this coding and was able to find additional examples. Binars had clipped coding into the Phoenix station codes. For what purpose was not immediately clear though. Within the coding of the Binar was another layer. And this was nearly as varied as the species of the galaxy.

The search with Binar coding as end brackets was revealing however. He found segments of coding from Klingons, Humans, Ferengi, and a few other races in there too. Then he found Orion coding, bracketed by Binar, buried in the memory core files. It looked as if this would 'self destruct' the files it was attached to, if activated. He went no further. He would have to report this to the chief.

DW 250 suddenly appeared in the chief's office, forming from the thin air in front of her desk. "Chief. I believe I have some information, although I do not think it solves the problem you asked me to resolve."

Eiwan looked up from her padd. It would take some time to acclimatize to photonic behaviours. At the end of her shift she would disable the holoemitters in her personal quarters to head off potentially untimely appearances by DW. "I would appreciate any information you have, DW."

"There is evidence of Binar coding embedded within the Phoenix coding," said DW 250.

"The subroutines we downloaded from Starbase Phoenix?" If Phoenix had also been affected, it was a much wider phenomenon than she suspected. "We had to use Phoenix as a template to rebuild our own systems after the memory core failure. All of those subroutines were vetted to the best of our knowledge at the time."

"Except I do not think it is only the Binar." said DW. "Their coding was utilized as a splice to put additional coding into the computers. This additional coding, would likely not be detected because of the binar coding encasing it. Only when we looked for the binar coding did we find it." said DW. "It acts a lot like a virus DNA inserting itself into the host."

"Downloading from Phoenix has merely propagated the same virus?" The scale was unbelievable. Eiwan had come aboard very recently and the station had been refitted no more than three years earlier when it was moved from within the Dyson Sphere to a position outside. Could it be a fault in the coding? Adapting our systems to the conditions of the Delta Quadrant may have left holes in our systems."

"A computer virus" said DW nodding. "It is clear it was malicious, and intentional." said DW. "The purpose is unknown, other than disruptive. While systems were down however, there is no record of what else occurred during that time interval."

"I have considered that same idea. So has Lieutenant Vaz. It may not be possible to deduce the events leading up to and during the memory core failure."

"I found some unactivated code, that if activated, would destroy portions of Star Base Phoenix's memory core." DW told the engineering chief. "I left them untouched and reported back to you." He may as well have said he found an unexploded bomb or booby trap in the memory core. "I do not know the extent of the buried coding, or if there are still back doors open to malicious intent."

"We have to assume there is a trigger and that it will be used when it is advantageous. I will contact Commander Chak aboard Phoenix and share your findings." Eiwan admonished herself for not maintaining better contact with the Klingon engineer. There was a

greater risk than she anticipated. "Do you think you've found the entirety of the malicious code?"

"No." said DW seriously. "I think I only found a clue as to how it was embedded." he said. "If you say Phoenix is also infected, this may go further than a simple attack on Sentinel Station, but one on your federation." Eiwan noted, that it was her Federation, not our federation.

"We have to mitigate the damage it can cause while keeping the code in situ." Eiwan immediately implemented double shifts for all Engineering staff. She would have to entice any engineer or technician with scheduled vacation to cancel. "We have to construct a framework to isolate systems from each other."

DW frowned. "That will limit my access as well. Is that your intent?" It seemed Eiwan continued on without pause though, not answering the question.

"It needs to be more robust than that." Eiwan stared at the photonic member of her team. "DW, you are at the greatest risk. Your consciousness is located entirely within Sentinel's computer systems. Your core program is still resident within the holocube provided by Lieutenant Jinx?"

"That is a danger for holograms." said DW. "While I am in Sentinel station computers, I cannot also be within the holocube. Shutting down a system we are within will cause us to 'die'. Our unique programming is lost." He paused. "If we could just duplicate our own code, we would not change or evolve. We would only be clones of EMH 1."

Eiwan was reassured. DW was likely the only uncontaminated portion of Sentinel. "I'm going to ask you limit your consciousness to the USS Kilimanjaro. It is likely also infected but its systems will be far easier to vet. We can compare it to other Danube-class ships

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both here and against the master copies held by the Corps of Engineers."

DW Nodded. "Very well. I will return to the holocube aboard Kilimanjaro. Perhaps I should stay within the system and not project to limit power drainage?"

"That would be prudent." Eiwán wasn't sure if "infected" or "infested" was a more appropriate term under the circumstances.

"Good Luck Eiwán, chief engineer of Sentiel Station." said DW and he phased out of existence.

Chapter Three

The Talaxian ship carried a very small crew. The usual shore leave had been withheld by the captain with compensation provided by their only passenger. There was very little speculation amongst the crew about the passenger's identity. They all had an idea of who he was and kept to themselves out of self-interest.

The captain and passenger disembarked. The captain, a frequent visitor, was quickly screened by the customs officer.

Jun'tao barely looked up at the next person in his line. "Name and planet of origin" he said coldly. His fingers opened a blank field on his console as he prepared for the answers that were certain follow.

"Mahlyk. Brunal." He would keep his answers curt. He had crossed the political boundaries of many worlds and the more information he volunteered, the more questions the customs officer would ask. The Federation had little flexibility at their frontiers. On so many worlds, his entrance would go unnoticed either by sloth or greed. Mahlyk had to formally enter the station and that record was uncomfortable.

His fingers accessed the planetary database on an alternate console. With as many different races that crossed the stations threshold, the Customs officer still was surprised with little known worlds more frequently than he would have thought. He scanned through the brief description of the planet before returning to his primary console and inputting more data into the field. "Brunal is quite far from here, no?" he said in question.

"Yes. It is quite distant from this facility." Mahlyk pre-empted the next inane comment. "Few of my people leave our world."

"What brings you to Sentinel Station?" Jun'tao asked curtly, now looking up at Mahlyk. His expression remained unwaveringly serious as he studied the Brunali before him.

"Business. We Brunali are not all farmers."

Jun'tao went back to the console and made more notes in the official document. "And what business do you have aboard?" he asked, again looking up and studying the Brunali's facial expression. "I am pursuing business opportunities in general. I have no specific contract." Mahlyk continued to keep his answers vague.

"Do you have proper documentation?" asked Jun'tao, his eyes still glued on the screen. His fingers seemed to be restless, inputting data feverishly while he waited for the Brunali to answer. He quickly brought up supporting documents, examining the answers he was receiving against his official data on the world, the businesses and any potential trickery that could be avoided. He couldn't afford to be careless, as this was his job.

"I do not believe documentation is necessary. The Talaxian who ferried me to this station did not indicate documentation was necessary." Mahlyk suppressed a sneer.

Jun'tao paused, letting Mahlyk ponder his own answers for a bit. He was able to identify many different attitudes and emotions through the scripted questions he repeated day after day. Even if there was no cause for any more interrogation, he was able to make note of anything that would cause speculation of agenda. For the most part, this could be attributed to a number of things and was not cause for alarm. He decided to continue with his questioning. "Any business conducted on the station would require documentation" he said casually, looking at Mahlyk.

"Perhaps it would be more accurate to describe my visit as one of leisure." Mahlyk was beginning to see doubt in the border guard.

From his understanding of Federation law, he had not committed a crime and the worst punishment was to be barred entry. His weapons cache had been left aboard the ship at the Talaxian captain's recommendation.

Jun'tao noted the change in the man's answers. "There are many places to visit for recreation and entertainment" he said. "Did you have one in mind you were going to visit?" he asked, more out of curiosity.

"I do not yet know." This Federation person had a weak, small, smooth forehead. Mahlyk would win a combat of intellect handedly. The ill fit of his prosthetic was beginning to grate on him. "Perhaps you have a suggestion. What would a tourist wish to see?"

"The options are so vast, I couldn't begin to advise. If you stop at information on the Promenade, they will give you a categorized list of what is available. I am certain that you will not be disappointed. Sentinel is fine destination for one looking for LEISURE" replied Jun'tao, pointedly. He turned back to his console to make one last note.

Mahlyk sensed the customs officer relaxing his position and decided not to press. "I have heard as much."

Jun'tao's fingers flew across the multicolored console, approving the Brunali's request to board Sentinel Station. At the bottom of the field displayed on his screen, the he checked a small red box that would alert station Security of the presence of the man as being questionable. Most likely nothing would become of it, but he was obligated to document anything that he felt unsure of. He looked up at Mahlyk when he was finished. "I do hope you will enjoy your stay" he said, his face void of any pleasant emotion.

"I will, thank you." Mahlyk said with a forced smile.

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Chapter Four

Crewman Maedi completed his tests and turned his seat at the front of the runabout's cabin to face the open space. "DW 250, please."

"Please state the nature of the engineering problem." Said DW as he appeared within the Kilimanjaro.

"DW." Greeted the Capellan with a nod. "Chief Eiwan asked me to personally vet the Kilimanjaro's systems to assure your program's integrity. I have examined the computer core for the Bynar patterns you identified and found none."

"That is fortunate." said DW. "You checked everything? Replicators? Library data bases? All clear?" All it took was one missed program, and they could accidentally reactivate a cascade that could rip apart his own programming.

"It is. I am confident that you may utilize the computer core aboard this ship safely." Maedi allowed a wide grin. On his square, muscular face, it appeared to be more of a smirk.

"I thank you for your diligence." said DW. "But I feel so useless now. I may be safe, but what about you? If the wrong systems shut down, you would be at risk for your lives as well." said DW. The first core principal of all the sentient beings was 'Do no harm', derived from the EMH programming. This continued on the DW series as well. Concern for the well being of the crew and civilians of Sentinel Station was not unusual for DW.

"As a being of flesh rather than photons, we have a natural redundancy." Maedi had been thrust into the role of protector on more than one occasion lately. "The station itself is a cache of breathable air with a chemical backup system in addition to the computerized filtration system. There are emergency food and

water supplies. Ultimately, escape to the Hope One Dyson Sphere. You do not have that depth of redundancy."

"I would appreciate your opinion. Until the station's systems can be verified as untainted, this will be your safe haven." Maedi swept his hand to emphasize the ship was DWs for his own use. He pushed the thought from his mind that this would be a prison. It lacked iron bars and even the computer lockouts that would prevent DW from expanding into Sentinel's systems but to proverbially step beyond the Danube-class ships confines would be unnecessary risk. "Chief Eiwan asked me to reassure you that you may interact with systems aboard Sentinel at your desire but recommends you maintain the processing segment of your program here.

"In other words; call, don't visit." he said dryly. Once he realized he was safe he fell into his own pattern thinking. "Correct. It shouldn't impact your access to the station."

"It would be like you using a console in engineering to examine the science labs on another deck. Possible, but not practical." said DW. "I am an engineer after all, there must be something I could do to assist you."

"There is one final test of confidence. It will take nine days to complete."

"Time is irrelevant." said DW. "What is it I can do to help?"

"We can use Kilimanjaro's communications system to compare it's entire system to a master copy from the Corps of Engineers. Over an encrypted link and randomly accessing the master copy in triplicate, it will be a firm assurance that Kilimanjaro is entirely safe." Maedi waited for DWs confirmation to move ahead. He added, "It will take months to perform the same test on a station like Sentinel."

"That sounds like a sound plan." said DW 250. "One I think we should get underway immediately."

"I agree."

"Well, we will need to get a way to send and receive communications from the Kilimanjaro, both to Sentinel station Computers, and to Starfleet Engineering Headquarters in the Delta Quadrant. That will allow us to download the comparative programming files to look and match the coding to look for mismatched codes." DW looked to Maedi. "We will have access to subspace bands to get this information?" "Kilimanjaro has complete independence. You have effective control of the ship except tactical and propulsion." Maedi pulled an isolinear chip from his belt. "I have the encryption key codes necessary to establish a connection." Maedi held it out. He hesitated for a moment unsure if the chip would simply fall to the floor.

"You can trust me crewman. Many aboard Cromwell did. Enough so i am the only hologram that has left Cromwell."said DW. He looked aorund the small room. "I've never been this... alone."

"If you deem it necessary. I will bunk here, aboard this ship, until you are confident of it's safety." Maedi offered.

DW smiled. "Your company would be appreciated." he said. He went to sit in one of the passenger chairs. "Mi casa, su Casa. Can I offer you something to drink while we await the final checks on Kilimanjaro's computers?"

Maedi did not understand the language DW used but took it to mean a heartfelt welcome. "Water, thank you."

Chapter Five

The message center was persistent, it was not an alarm, but someone was placing a call to the chief of engineering aboard Sentinel Station. It was coming from an outside line.

Eiwan was half asleep as she reached for the padd that was never more than a foot away from her hands. "Eiwan here."

DW 250's face appeared on the screen. "Hello Chief. I have been working on the problem of the computer system programming viruses. I think I have a solution."

"DW?"

"Yes, it is 0217.45 hours." said DW. "Oh, Sorry. It's about 215 am." DW admonished himself. Organics wanted rounded numbers, not precision. "And I am calling from the Kilimanjaro. Technically it is outside the Sentinel stations comm channels. And you weren't answering your comm badge."

"I was asleep DW." Eiwan instinctively read through the stream of reports and communiques in the few hours she was asleep. "Is there a concern with USS Kilimanjaro? I've removed it from active service." As she asked the question, she checked for reports from Maedi. There were none from the Capellan technician assigned to assist DW 250.

"Kilimanjaro is still in the hanger." DW confirmed.

"Is it something that cannot wait until morning?"

DW frowned. "I interrupted your sleep cycle. I am sorry." apologized DW 250. "Yes, this can wait. I am only half way through the Kilimanjaro computer sweep..."

"Have you found any of the Bynar codes in Kilimanjaro's systems?" Eiwán knew there was a pending vulnerability aboard the station and the first attempt at clearing the malicious subroutines provided insufficient. DW had identified a deeper layer to the hack. "I am awake now."

DW nodded. "I have found a way to speed up the process. Something we did on Cromwell once."

"Go ahead, DW." Eiwán had expected months of work to clean Sentinel's systems. DW 250 would create a ring of safety around himself and then apply the technique starting with Sentinel's most critical systems. Evacuation was a real possibility if the problem could not be wrestled quickly.

You may not want to hear this," DW 250 said "But It is important for you to understand, so you know how we overcame the problem."

"Please continue. Any lead would be appreciated."

"Last year, Cromwell encountered an offshoot of Borg that had become isolated from the unimatrix. Long Story, mostly still classified by Cromwell. I did feel right nosing into the details, but I did have some general access to Cromwell's records, and of course I was there."

"I do have a good security clearance for Starfleet. I'm not sure how much information I should be privy to from Cromwell, however." Eiwán had been granted access to a significant amount of intelligence on the Nal'G. There was precedent to the attack sustained by Sentinel but no direct links. At this point, there were no leads.

"Sorry, I will try and remain direct. The borg were essentially isolated from the Unimatrix because of Communications problems.

The obvious solution was to make a communications array. But that also meant first getting space travel."

"You mean their vessel had crashed? They were trapped on a planet or moon?"

"They were trapped on a world with pre warp technology. Before the Borg crashed there, they had been pre industrial, but the borg adapted, by assisting the Azarans rise their technology to industrial, and when Cromwell Arrived, they had just finished getting ahold of Dilitium from Klingons. Of coarse the Klingons did not know who they were dealing with at the time."

"The Klingons sold dilithium to a pre-warp civilization?" Eiwan couldn't imagine the power dynamic. A Klingon ship would rather attack for dilithium than sell it. They must have been offered quite a price.

"Yes Ma'am. In short, The Borg Took off in a Sphere they had built, and used Warp technology for power. But the combined forces of the Klingons and Cromwell were able to defeat them."

"Two ships against a Borg sphere of some sort. Even a small sphere would have been difficult to overcome."

"It was just before the balance of the battle shifted to our side. The Borg attacked the Klingons and Cromwell, and used holotechnology to recreate borg drones. They were unstoppable by the organics."

If Eiwan had heard this story from anyone else, it would be a tall tale. She didn't doubt DW's sincerity. It was still an incredible story.

"The Holograms aboard Cromwell banded together to fight the Borg Drones. Unfortunately, the Borg had continued their assimilation practices." DW actually paused in his story.

"I have been borg Chief." admitted DW. "Nearly all holograms aboard Cromwell had been assimilated. If EMH1 had not alerted the crew, and been willing to risk his own existence, this conversation would not be happening right now." said DW 250. "As it is, He was nearly destroyed himself."

"Been a Borg? Escaping the Borg is a rare occurrence." Eiwan could count on one hand the number of individuals that had been assimilated and resisted. The legendary Captain Picard of the Enterprise-E was the only one. The USS Voyager encountered partially assimilated children. They had not matured into adulthood with the cybernetic implants. No. Two. A human female as well. "The Borg subroutines were removed from your programming. Cleanly?"

"Jinx was able to recover a number of the holograms. A few were too gone to recover without removing critical programming to their personality and self awareness. But the vast majority were saved."

"I'm glad you were saved, DW." Eiwan had made some dear friends since coming aboard.

"Once Jinx was able to find a clean copy of the programming, instead of going through that process with each hologram, which would have taken years, he sent us through what effectively was a scanner." said DW 250. "Our programs could be matched and scanned nearly instantaneously and compared to the clean copy."

"It would still require verifiable clean subroutines from the Corps of Engineers."

"Yes, the initial downloads from Starfleet are already coming over, and are placed in a isolated and secure computer system." said DW. "They are more extensive than looking at a single hologram, But we can do the same thing with them as Jinx did with us. We have a clean copy. Think of it like holding two papers

up to the light. If they are the same, it is obvious, if they have even one or two words different, it is also obvious. We don't need to check the entire program, only do the cover match, and examine the discrepancies." said DW 250. "And we already know how the discrepancy codes are placed. Individual changes normally found in systems would not have the Bynar bracketing of code unless it was in there to hide malicious code."

"Not to be overly negative, DW. Our systems are far more varied than a collection of hundreds of photonic beings." Eiwan couldn't see how the technique would apply to something as large as Sentinel. "How can you use such a technique on systems as varied as tactical and replicators?"

"The hologram programs are like DNA. 97% of the programing is the same as every other. It the 3% that make us different from each other, and likely unique." said DW. "Did you know that about 97% of Human DNA is similiar to one of the primate offshoots, chimpanzees? Remarkable that only a minor variation could cause such a significant difference in the result..."

"I understand that much of the DNA strand is to code for day-to-day needs." Biology class was a long time ago for Eiwan. "Like proteins are produced by like segments of DNA."

"Back to the point. Once we clear the common programs of contamination, the smaller varied portions can be checked manually." said DW. "But a problem would occur during the isolation times....Do Starfleet programs have translation programs running between systems? We would have to verify all coding passing through these systems was clean before reintegration."

"They do. Any system that would interact with non-Starfleet systems would have the translation subroutines in place. In most cases, they are never triggered but are still present." Eiwan admonished herself for not coming up with such a simple, brilliant solution. "We can scan that portion of the code using your overlay

approach. It should identify affected systems and give us a much smaller subset to work with."

"If we can function on slower systems for a short period of time..." DW paused as he considered Eiwan's variation in the program. A quick subroutine check for alternative pathways sent a signal to DW 250 to check and revise if acceptable. It was DW's 'Flash of inspiration'. "But we could actually use the translation programs as a scanner itself, flagging and stopping any program outside our set parameters."

"Brilliant. We change the translation parameters. It will give us the time necessary to locate and correct the subroutines themselves." Eiwan smiled broadly, showing her teeth. She couldn't help herself. DW 250 was going to single-handedly resolve a system failure that had recently crippled Sentinel Station.

"I calculate that based on the initial scans I performed on sentinels computers, the incidence will be relatively low of finding these inserted codes. It is only a matter of isolating the systems, and performing the checks on the discrepancies we do find. I think it will only take a few coders less than a year to accomplish this with a 99.97% confidence there are no hidden codes left."

"I believe we will still have to vet each and every system over time. This subroutine can replicate and spread if something is missed." warned Eiwan.

"We will have to keep systems isolated until the complete computer coverage can be checked to prevent re-infection. The mechanical isolation will take longer than the coding checks." assured DW 250. It also meant he would be isolated from systems until such time each individual system was cleared.

"If we can maintain firm isolation, we can rely on that 99.97% confidence." repeated Eiwan for herself as much as for DW. "Some

critical systems may also require active surveillance. If isolation fails, detection and quarantine may be necessary,"

"Borg coding was straightforward. Efficient, not trying to be hidden. But it was powerful in terms of assimilation." DW said "As coding was removed, additional borg coding was placed. It made remove tricky and dangerous. The coding we are dealing with is trickier, using stealth instead of brute force. But you have discovered the markers that the code used to hide itself within Sentinel Stations programs. The Bynar brackets that bury the code and cause our scans to skip over them. We can now use them efficiently to splice out of the programs, even if we do not entirely understand what coding is buried between."

"Do you still have Borg subroutines within your programming?" Eiwan felt she could trust DW. They had built a friendship. The idea of partial assimilation sent a chill down her spine.

On the screen DW shook his head. "No chief. None of the borg programming survived the holograms. No specimens were saved for later study. Cromwell wanted all possibility of accidental release discovery of the programming destroyed."

"That was wise. I doubt any segment of Borg would remain contained for long." Eiwan had heard rumours of Borg technology retained from the battle of Sector 001. They had never been anything more than rumour although some technologies introduced by Starfleet over in the last fifty years seemed like more than a leap of incremental invention. Even Sentinel Station had ablative hull technology. Damaged section of hull could be regrown. "And the Borg that had been marooned on-planet?"

"No, The borg themselves were also destroyed. Captain Sesgaard required all debris larger than a 'pop can' be destroyed, so the borg could not accidentally 'rediscover' the use of 'Holoborg drones'." said DW. "That's why I hesitated to bring it up to you. I would

appreciate it if we did not let this go beyond our own conversation."

"Of course. I have a high security clearance. I understand the sensitivity of that kind of knowledge." Eiwan suppressed a yawn. It was nearly 0300 hours. "How long will you need to amend develop subroutine modifications? Once complete, we can adjust the translation parameters and begin a targeted cleanup."

"Just a few days for the translation subroutines. The longer work will be physically isolating the systems so they do not cross contaminate each other. I think a few months for that, depending on manpower, and any problems we encounter. Sentinel station is new, so there should be few alternative pathways built such as one would find in older facilities." outlined DW. "Then it should just be a matter of running the copy overlays and examining discrepancies."

"I'll check in with you before the end of my shift, tomorrow, then. I know you don't sleep, DW, but, as we organics say: good night."

"Thanks Chief." said DW with a satisfied sound.

Chapter Six

Mahlyk walked along the Promenade with no intent or purpose. He perused the various shops the station had to offer, stopping to view what was displayed in some of the windows. His interest was brief, and he moved on to the next after a quick glance. Every so often, he glanced around, casually making note of the chronometer that hung high above the deck. He made no eye contact with any passersby as he strolled along the hall, peering this way and that. After a good while taking his time, he began to pick up his pace ever so slightly, making way out of the novelty section. He continued to look about, noting the dining establishments he now passed. There were so many to choose from, most of them rather busy with clientele. He sniffed the air, the aromas of different cuisine wafting across the hall.

He kept walking and eventually the establishments became less and less occupied. Eventually, he arrived at a place that suited him. It was a very small establishment, dimly lit. The central focus, when walking in the door, was a bar at the far end of the room, that seemed to have most of the light in the room focused on it, though it was not much to speak of. There were tables littering the rest of the floor, though most of them unattended. He wasn't at all sure of the nature of the cuisine that was served, but it was of no matter.

He motioned to the barkeep with his finger when he could get his attention and pointed towards a table in one corner of the room, isolated. Without a word he quickly moved in that direction and sat down. He looked around the bar, which he could see the entirety of from his seat. The clientele at the bar seemed to not notice him, or at least to not care about his presence. Shortly, a small, odd looking creature waddled over to Mahlyk's table.

"What'll it be tonight, Bub?" he said in a gruff voice.

Mahlyk looked at the short little creature, then grabbed the worn menu that lay on the table. "I don't suppose you have any Ales from my corner of the quadrant?" he said, looking over the offerings.

The small waiter eyed him carefully before spitting back his retort. "And how am I supposed to know or care where that would be?" he asked, seeming impatient.

Mahlyk smiled at the response. His question had provoked just what he had hoped to hear. "Well then, my friend, I will take your finest Ale. I don't care what. The darker the better" he said, putting the menu back down.

The waiter huffed as he turned and waddled back towards the bar to fetch the beverage. He quickly disappeared behind the counter, it being significantly taller than himself.

Mahlyk looked around again before going back to looking at the menu. There was not much to speak of in the way of food, but he was honestly not all that hungry to begin with.

"The forehead suits you." said a middle-aged man as he sat down at the next stool.

Mahlyk continued looking at his menu. He recognized the voice and did not need to look at the man to see who he was. "Glad you approve" he replied, his face remaining stoic. "This is a fine establishment you've chosen."

"Uh-huh. Did you have any trouble passing through customs?" The man had been keeping tabs on Mahlyk since his arrival. He hadn't seen any of the usual security officers following his charge.

"No trouble" said Mahlyk. "At least, no more than expected" he admitted. He knew that the customs officer was only doing his job,

but he would be surprised if his suspicion wouldn't have been followed up on. He had the feeling that his steps should be taken cautiously.

"Right to brass tacks."

The waiter put down an ale in front of each man and backed away without comment.

The man dropped a small device into the glass of ale. It was a signal dampener that metabolized alcohol as a power source. While being carried on his person, it was a small inert item. When burning alcohol for fuel, it provided a degree of safety. "Someone new on the station has made an enemy. They're looking for assistance."

"I see" said Mahlyk. "I'm listening, though should I be worried about blowback? Stations like this have been known to be host to a more tight-knit conglomeration of business folk and residents. I do suppose, however, that it depends on what you are asking of me."

"I have friends and those friends have friends. It's nothing you need to concern yourself with." The man had been aboard for some time and knew a few people who he could trust. He wasn't as hard-line as some of the others in the organization. Mingling with Alpha Quadrant aliens was a part of the job. By the same token, he accepted paid jobs to augment those he took on without payment. Patriotism was a poor substitute for hard currency. "They do not know your identity."

"Anonymity is crucial, as I am sure you are well aware. Now that that is settled, tell me what the trouble is and what it is you think that I can do to remedy this trouble" said Mahlyk.

"I don't rightly know. As you said, anonymity. I have a time and place for you to be and they will contact you at there with further instructions." The man heard a chirp at his wrist, checked the dim

display and ignored it. "They need someone with computing skills and no conscience. I naturally thought of you."

"I'm FLATTERED" responded Mahlyk with sarcasm. "Now down to business....."

"I have already received payment and I've deposited your share the usual way." It was unusual to be paid in full before the job had begun. The anonymous party had confidence in both himself as Mahlyk to complete the job as contracted. "Holosuite three in the Omag Restaurant and Music Lounge. Three hundred hours tomorrow morning. The entrance from corridor 10-104 is going to be left ajar just for you. The name of the program is 'Melor Famagal'. When the program begins, you'll receive the next set of instructions."

"A little early" responded Mahlyk in jest. He had dealt with this man long enough to know that most of his comments would be expected and ignored. His track record was all that need be scrutinized. He would do the job and do it well. No one would be complaining in the end. Almost, no one.

"We're good?"

"Good is what we are" Mahlyk responded. He picked up the glass with the black liquid and raised it to his mouth. A generous sip passed over his tongue and down his throat. It tasted delicious to him. "Sure glad they didn't have anything from Brunal" he said, with a shake of his head. He raised the glass again and drained more of the Ale. 0300 would come very soon, he thought while the glass continued to lose volume. He would be ready.

Chapter Seven

Mahlyk could barely feel the effects of the Ale when he rolled out of bed. Had he the opportunity, he would've remained in the bar the night before and consumed more of the dark Ales that he'd enjoyed. He was a professional, though. Nothing would interfere with his assignment. He passed the entrance to the restaurant that he had been instructed to go to. The Omag Restaurant and music lounge was not the normal sort of seedy establishment he would have expected to get his assignments in. He normally liked to keep a very low profile in these dealings. It was how he had become so successful at being the go-to guy, in very certain circles, of course.

He passed the restaurant, giving it a through glance before rounding the corner and heading up corridor 10-104. He walked up the corridor, running his hand along the wall until he felt it jut out. Stopping immediately, Mahlyk moved to the other side and examined the portion of the wall that was uneven. It was what appeared to be a rear access, most likely to the holosuite, and it had been propped open as his handler had instructed it would be. He opened the access door only enough to slip through and closed it behind him, removing the case that it had been propped open with. Moving cautiously, he made his way into the projection chamber of the holosuite.

"Thank you; for coming." came a mechanical voice as the holosuite was activated.

He watched as the room came to life, all evidence of it's emptiness vanishing with the extremely life like 3D images being displayed in front of him. He waited, watching the program load in front of him. It was not his normal meeting, being given instructions from a program, but he could certainly understand the desire for his clients to remain unseen. It also fit his criteria for remaining unknown as well.

"I appreciate your expediency; in this matter. Please stay any salutations; you wish to convey."

Mahlyk huffed. He was not accustomed to dealing with holograms, specifically ones with such impatience. He did not wish to waste time, though, so he complied willingly. "What do you require of me?" he asked directly.

"You seem to be a direct individual. Very well; then. Photonic beings have been created; with the intent of expansion into the Delta Quadrant. You are of like mind; in questioning the intentions of the Delta Freedom Alliance. Your computing and assassination skills are uniquely paired; to rid this station of such a being."

"You wish to have a 'Photonic Being' assassinated?" Mahlyk asked in surprise. He was not normally accustomed to being this direct in these matters, but he was also not normally tasked with an assignment such as this. "And how have you come to believe that I would be the appropriate choice for this task?" he asked. He wasn't wanting to dissuade the hologram of his abilities, but he was more curious now.

"You know full well; of the subroutines inserted throughout Sentinel Station. They are pervasive; as designed."

Mahlyk drew nearer the hologram with curiosity. He circled around, eyeing it up and down before coming face to face with it again. "Sentinel's subroutines" he repeated. "Your design?" he asked.

"I did; have a hand in their design."

"It seems as though they have fallen short of their intended design, NO?" asked Mahlyk. He had been informed of the difficulties the Station Administration had been experiencing, though he had not been aware that his assignment was related. He was more

comfortable with a traditional observe and eliminate contract. This technically minded conspiracy was only slightly out of his normal, but he was competent enough to oblige.

"One of your contemporaries; applied his craft prematurely. He did not have my permission. The station suffered a catastrophic systems failure; ahead of schedule."

Mahlyk sighed a contemplative sigh. He was beginning to understand what was happening, or rather, whom he was contracted by. "And you need to finish the job, correctly?" he asked.

"Yes."

Mahlyk stepped back and sat himself in one of the chairs that sat against the simulated wall. He crossed his legs and folded his hands into a ball, resting them on his knees and waited to hear what it actually was he was expected to do.

"The photonic being is being held in a secure location; outside of my purview. There are two components to such a being; computation and physical." The hologram continued unemotionally. "Once the computational aspect of the photonic being is isolated, it can be physically located; and the second phase begins. Do you have extraneous needs?"

"Only what is required" responded Mahlyk. His skills were vast, though his expertise rested only in one thing, and his record proved that. Technology was not foreign to him, luckily, as it appeared a more than basic knowledge was going to be required for this contract.

"The core program of the photonic being requires a dedicated host system; one that it believes uncompromised."

"Will not the Station Administration be on high alert to their systems, especially the ones that had been compromised?" he asked.

"The depth of our infiltration is yet unknown to station administration. You will engage the photonic being in conversation; while I locate it. You will be given the opportunity to plant physical explosives; once it is located."

Explosives. Mahlyk was beginning to feel at home now. If it wasn't a high powered, long range disruptor rifle, he would just as well assume to use something that would do well at eliminating partial evidence in the process. Unfortunately, his friend at customs would have frowned on his bringing anything of the sort onto the station. "Can I assume you are in possession of said devices?" asked Mahlyk.

"That will be provided; at such time as you require. Do you have further questions; before you begin?"

Mahlyk nodded indicating that he had none. It SEEMED fairly simplistic enough, though if experience taught him anything, it was that things are never what they seem. Overconfidence could be as dangerous as the authorities to the success of this job. He would not succumb. Mahlyk moved to the rear of the room, back to the utility access door he had entered. He paused momentarily, his hand extended to press the activation panel on the left side of the door. He looked back at the center of the projection grid, an idea entering his thoughts. He needed to generate a believable engineering problem that would draw the photonic being, but nothing that would alert station administration of a major malfunction. He turned back, running his hand along the sides of the holo-chamber that was housed inside the utility access corridor that lead to the access door. The casing for the chamber was short and he soon reached the end. He moved around the end of the

structure, feeling the edges of case until, along the backside of the unit, an access panel detached.

Mahlyk removed the panel quickly, unaware if it would be alarmed. Reaching inside, he detached the wiring harness and freed two of the hot wires from withing the clip. In a matter of moments, he had short-circuited the power grid and applied a charge powerful enough to begin burning out some of the wiring, simulating a power surge that could have come about through faulty or aged wiring. The holodeck went dark in the adjacent room and Mahlyk was already reassembling the the wiring harness and attaching the panel to the surface of the casing once again.

With haste, Mahlyk moved away from the corridor, not towards the door, but feeling his way through the darkness to the main door that lead to the Omag restaurant. He slipped through, entering the establishment. He had noticed on his surveillance sweep that the holosuite section of the Restaurant was not staffed, so he was able to slip into the crowded restaurant without notice.

The automated holosuite kiosk where customers could register to reserve a suite was located on the opposite wall. Mahlyk fought through the crowd until he reached the kiosk. There was some form of live entertainment currently in process, so he had no trouble obtaining a reservation for the now inoperable holosuite. The kiosk reported the malfunction immediately when he attempted to reserve holosuite three. Not able to run a program, Mahlyk selected the option to notify management of a service requirement. Being done with the kiosk, he returned to the crowd, staying within sight of the holosuite entrance. Here he would wait.

The operations technician headed straight for the holosuite. He had a portable transporter buffer pre-loaded with spare parts and a toolbox in the other hand. Upon entering the holosuite, the smell of burnt plastic was noticeable. He frowned and began surveying the room for the fault.

Mahlyk watched the technician enter the holosuite from a distance. He moved in swiftly after the man with ease. The bustle of the busy restaurant was easily left behind and no one seemed to notice his departure from the crowd. He entered the holosuite behind the technician and closed the door, drawing his weapon.

The technician turned, surprised. His eyes moved from the grimace on the man standing inside the closed door to the holosuite and the weapon in his hand. He froze.

"Where is the photonic Engineer?" demanded Mahlyk, his eyes steady. He kept the small disruptor trained on the Engineer. No doubt he would know of the photonic being as well as his location. It wasn't ideal, but Mahlyk knew it was a long shot that the photonic being would have been sent right to him. It was always a possibility he would be forced to go the hard route, and that seemed what would be required.

"We don't have photonic engineers on the station." The technician thought for a second that it was a prank. He was fairly new to the station and he wouldn't put it past his colleagues to trick him into thinking he was under attack. He saw through their ruse.

"Computer. End program"

"No program in progress." replied the computer flatly.

The technician stared blankly at the man in the holosuite with him. It was a real person holding a real weapon.

"The holosuite is offline" said Mahlyk with sarcasm as if the engineer had not been aware of why he was sent. "You know of the photonic being onboard this station" he said, not in questioning tone. "I want you to contact him, if you would be so kind" he said. "Entice him to join us, and do your very best" he added, waving the disruptor at the technician.

The technician nodded. "Chang to DW 250. Engineering emergency at my position."

=/\= Please state the nature of the emergency. =/\= said DW. He was tired of being cooped up in the runabout. He had amused himself by working on the code verification of various systems within Sentinel Station, but there was still additional programming that needed to be cleared before he could start jumping around easily. The translation programs between systems gave him... a headache, for lack of a better description.

"It's a serious engineering issue at my position." The crewman didn't know how exactly he was supposed to entice the photonic engineer to the holosuite.

=/\= That Holosuite is currently out of operation. =/\= said DW. A broken entertainment Holosuite was not an engineering emergency, not even for a photonic.

"It is." Chang looked to the unknown individual still holding a weapon.

=/\= I am sorry Mr Chang, but, in the words of the great Montgomery Scott, 'I kinna change the law of physics.' You should place a call to one of the other Sentinel Station engineers. Besides, technically, I am just a civilian here. =/\= pointed out DW. =/\=Well, I cannot go to your position until the holosuite is repaired, at least to functionality of projecting my program at that location. =/\= pointed out DW 250

Mahlyk shook his head. This was already getting messier than he'd expected. He raised his hands in a question fashion, gesturing towards the man his pistol. He didn't wish to make himself known over the COMM but he figured that the technician would guess his meaning.

"Perhaps I can come to you?" Chang believed he understood the Brunali's meaning. The crewman was beginning to perspire from the stress.

"Now that would be illogical." said DW, looking around he runabout. "Where I am is not useful to repairing a holodeck on the promenade." said DW. While they had been talking, he had tracked down where the engineer was, down to the specific holosuite. It was a useless task, as there was no way into the holosuite for him. There was no indication of why it was nonfunctional either. Most unusual.

"Just curious," said the crewman doing as best he could to keep the strain from his voice. He was at a loss for words. "Um."

Mahlyk eyed the readout on his disruptor. The Weapon had been retrofitted with an advanced encryption analyzation device that was capable of hijacking many forms of signals, including local COMM channels. He had been tracing the channel the technician was using the whole while. It had taken some time, but he was now looking at a general location of the photonic being known as DW 250. He waved his free hand across his throat, nodding his agreement and commencement of the man's services.

"I, uh, am not sure what the problem is. I'd appreciate a second opinion." Chang remembered his training. He needed to somehow alert DW 250 to the threat. He was racking his brain trying to think of something at the barrel of a disruptor.

"Very well. Why don't you come by the Runabout, we can discuss the problems, and perhaps I can offer a suggestion." said DW, confirming the location Mahlyk had just figured out. It was the least he could do. At least until the emitters were back up in the holosuite. Why had they gone out, but not the power to the room?

Mahlyk smiled at the man. He could see that he was frightened. Anyone would have been in his situation. "Excellent work" he said. "You have helped me tremendously. Now, if you would be so kind to turn and face the wall and put your hands behind your back" said Mahlyk.

Chang exhaled slowly. He turned, resigned to his fate.

He watched the technician slowly turn until his back was facing him. Without hesitation, the Brunali raised the disruptor fluidly and fired two rapid suppressed blasts at the back of the man's head. He watched his body fall to the ground and returned the weapon to its holster under his cloak. He wasted no time passing through the same corridor he had gained access to the holosuite by and slipped back through the rear access door, leaving the holosuite to make his way to his mark's location.

Mahlyk moved fluidly through the corridor, following the route generated by the navigation software on his device. The device alerted him with a vibration when he neared the turn he would need to take. The route lead him away from the promenade, which would limit the exposure to surveillance devices no doubt monitored by station security. The backdoor data generated by Mahlyk's handler had been uploaded to his device and would lead him seamlessly through the stations security protocols and grant him access to the area's needed to reach his mark. He moved quickly, but not so much as to draw attention. To anyone else, he was just another visitor exploring the station, but to the security encrypted access he approached, he was an authorized user. The access panel illuminated green as he approached, allowing him to continue with no delay.

=/\= Engineer Chang? =/\= called DW. =/\= Please remember to bring the tricorder readouts of the power supply to the Holoemitters of the holosuite....=/\=

He waited for a response, but none was forthcoming. =/\= Chang? =/\= called DW again. But he got the same result. The comm link appeared to be open, DW checked he was transmitting, and the comm routers were receiving. Chang just wasn't answering his open channel. That was odd too. Now he had two oddities. He checked the computer virus scans for communications and holodecks. Holodecks had not yet been scanned, but Communications remained clean. DW did the mental equivalent of a shrug. More data required. He would get that in a few minutes when Chang arrived with the tricorder readings. Until then, he would leave the channel open, and perhaps as Chang moved, DW would hear Chang's arrival and they could solve both oddities at once.

DW went about his business, awaiting Chang to arrive.

Chapter Eight

The security officer patrolled the corridor in the Starfleet section of the station adjacent to the Promenade. Civilians occasionally slipped through, lost. He would kindly direct them back through a hatch carelessly left ajar. He noticed a man in civilian clothes turn the corner. "Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to turn around. This section is not open to civilians."

The Brunali had no time for distractions. The Engineer in the holosuite would soon be discovered and he expected to have fulfilled his assignment and be back on board the transport out by then. He barely looked at the man addressing him before raising and firing his weapon simultaneously. His senses were refined and the the glance was all he needed to be assured of a proper shot placement.

The security officer's reaction was slowed by surprise. "Cha-"

Mahlyk slipped quickly out of the corridor through the smaller access door. His navigational aid would have to reroute his course to the Photonic being, but there were too many hats on the ground for what this job was supposed to be. He moved swiftly through the utility corridor and up a level. A quick glance at the small readout on his weapon revealed a small, blinking indicator that he was nearly to his destination. As he approached the small, round access door, the panel to the left glowed green, indicating his access was accepted and the codes input in Sentinel's systems were still active and working. He crouched down and slipped through the small opening, finding himself in the corridor adjacent to the shuttlebay on the other side.

An alert appeared on an Engineering console. An energy discharge registered. A quick glance at the energy throughputs in that section didn't reveal anything out of the ordinary. The discharge was in the corridor outside the shuttle bay. That was the location of the

photonic being that Chief Eiwan brought back from the Engineering Conference on Chetzia. =\=Chang to Maedi.=\=

=\= Maedi here. =\=

=\= Are you and the photonic doing anything out of the ordinary? I read an energy discharge near your location. =\=

=\= No. DW is working through the transporter buffer maintenance systems. =\= Maedi checked the progress of his current scan. =\= I have finished the transporter targeting scanners. =\=

=\= You're the nearest engineer. Can you pop your head into the corridor and let me know what you find? =\=

=\= Will do Chief. Maedi out. =\= Crewman Maedi stood from his seat. DW was motionless. It was a bit jarring to see absolutely no motion from the photonic engineer. The latter had explained, but, it was still strange to see. Maedi knew that DW had overheard the conversation with the shift supervisor. There was no need to repeat himself.

Maedi hit the controls to open the exterior hatch. He had his toolkit in-hand and stepped one foot onto the external step. A Brunali male was standing less than a metre away.

Mahlyk had his disruptor ready. He hadn't expected to see anyone outside of the craft where the photonic being was located. His plan was simple: activate the explosives left for him by his contact and get to the docking section quickly to board his transport away. A quick scan of the shuttle bay told him that either his contact had hid the devices well, to not be found, or he had been misinformed. In his business, being misinformed on such a crucial detail of such a sensitive job meant only one thing: he had been set up. Mahlyk was not about to fight his way through an entire regiment of station

security, so evasion was his only option. He made a quick, calculated move to the nearest cover to avoid being seen by the individual exiting the craft, not entirely sure of his success.

Maedi walked across the open decking to the hangar bay's hatch.

The discharge from the weapon came in a less precise manner than normally dealt by Mahlyk's hand, but he was normally in much more control over the situation and not diving for cover. This job was about to ruin his reputation and everything he'd worked so hard for. He popped his head up to see if he would by chance have the astounding fortune of a clean shot through the small craft's hatch to the occupant inside. He knew better than such luck. This would not be easy.

Maedi crumpled soundlessly to the floor.

Mahlyk lay behind the crate that he sought refuge near and accessed the device on his disruptor. He detected no security dispatch, but that was surely soon to change. He could see the being that had exited the craft and could detect the mark inside. He would have to act quick if he were to dispatch them both AND make it to his transport. This was not going to as elegant as his normal jobs, he was resigned to this. He tapped a series of buttons on the device and charged the disruptor for a short, controlled burst. Rolling away from the crate, he fired three rapid shots at the rear of the craft and lunged forward, taking refuge on it's starboard side, making himself as flat to the hull of the vessel as he could. He looked around again, making sure he wasn't mistaken about the explosives, but found none. He cursed himself for being caught in such a compromising situation. If he survived this folly, he vowed to find the answers as to what had transpired, why and remedy the situation by dispatching those responsible.

=/\= DW to Security. Why is there weapons fire in the shuttle bay?

=/\= asked the hologram looking out the window.

=/\=Weapons fire is not indicated. At your location. Which crew are present?=\= responded the security officer mechanically.

=/\= Just Maedi and myself. =/\= answered the Hologram. =/\= and I don't see Maedi. Oh wait... there. No, someone else, I don't recognize. I don't see Maedi anywhere. =/\=

=/\=Can you describe the individual? For verification. Is it a Brunali male? That is present with yourself, DW two-five-zero? =/\=

"Brunali?" asked DW 250 sounding surprised. "Why, yes, it is!"

The communications channel buzzed momentarily. Security fields crackled to life at each of the hatches leading to the hangar bay.

=/\=Your position has been secured. Such that there is no escape.=/\=

"Oh thank goodness. Now you can send in the security forces to apprehend this Brunali..." began DW.

=/\=You cannot be allowed to escape. The creation of a photonic intelligence cannot be allowed. To perpetuate and infect carbon life. The personality of a photonic being is merely a program. With no inherit valuation of life.=/\=

"What? Me?" said DW. This was quite the misunderstanding. "I am not trying escape..."

The voice continued ignoring DW.

"What do you mean no valuation of life? That is my primary programming." said DW exasperated.

=/\=You will find many systems aboard station infiltrated. I have been quite thorough. In anticipation of this moment.=/\=

"So it's you..." said DW. The infiltrator that had been infecting computer programs throughout Sentinel Station.

The whine of a transporter filled the compartment. The pervasive security force fields dulled the sound. A rather small device appeared. It's internal ticking was inaudible. With the USS Kilimanjaro located as the location of the photonic program calling itself DW 250 and it's hatch open, the device could be delivered. The presence of the Nal'Gaharay operative proved usefully distracting. The investigator assigned to the shuttle explosion only moments away would link the obvious threads into a case of means, motive and opportunity. With the three key elements of crime identified, no further investigation would be warranted.

DW looked at the bomb. Now that is a sticky wicket DW thought. He quickly replicated a set of engineering tools. He was an engineer after all. "I can do this." DW said aloud. It should just be a simple electronic problem, right?

Mahlyk looked up from behind his cover. He had expected to be fully engaging Sentinel's security forces by now, yet none were present. He saw the photonic being at the rear of the runabout looking at something that had not been there. He huffed to himself, realizing that he had been a mere distraction. He stood, understanding that they were likely to not be having company, at least not for a few moments.

DW looked up. "Looking for this?" he asked nodding to the bomb on the floor.

Mahlyk approached the runabout, Disruptor trained on DW. He eyed the explosive keenly, wondering if the plan had been to take him out of the equation with the blast all along. It was unlikely he would be allowed to escape at this stage, and his opportunity to retreat was most likely growing to a close.

DW looked at the phaser. "I eat light energy for breakfast." he said dismissing the phaser as a threat. "This explosive is a bit more of a problem."

"Indeed" replied Mahlyk, moving slightly closer, keeping his weapon pointed at DW. "Perhaps I will leave you to your work, then" he said. "My usefulness here is just about up, wouldn't you say?" he asked.

"You may want to reconsider running away. You won't get far. The real criminal in the venture has put security forcefields on the hanger bay doors. No one is leaving the hanger before the bomb goes off." That effectively stopped either transporters within the hanger or from outside from interfering. The two of them could not beam out, nor beam out the bomb, but then again, nothing else would be coming in either.

"Of course not" said Mahlyk, not surprised at this little glitch in the plan.

"Bomb dentonates." said DW, "Security rushes in, and finds only you here. And Maedi..." DW looked up. "Is he still alive?" he asked the assassin.

"He lives" responded Mahlyk. "For now. Though I would be less concerned with him and more concerned with what the answer is to this predicament. It seems that we are both in a somewhat compromising situation here" he admitted.

"Doesn't matter. You are at a career ending position." said DW. "Perhaps life ending if you don't help me now." he said looking down at the bomb. "I suppose you routinely work with this type of explosive?"

"Possibly" responded Mahlyk. "And this would be the part where you request my assistance in disarming this device" he said, still unsure of how to take the Photonic Being. "You may forget, though, that this is why I am here. The forcefields trapping me in here with you and this device, not part of the plan."

DW put down his tools. If he had time, he could negotiate his way out of this, DW 250 was a skilled diplomat as well as an engineer, at least among his own kind. He did not have the luxury though of time. There was a countdown clock that wound back towards zero. "I need to be blunt with you Sir." said DW 250. "If this bomb goes off, I die. You go to rehabilitation. If this bomb does not go off; You live, I live, and you may, just maybe, have a chance to seek retribution on those who would put you into this position."

Mahlyk thought deeply of the sense the being was now making. He was running low on options at the moment and did not have any time to debate the outcome. The truth was, he had been setup. He was hired for a job and had outlived his usefulness. He was now expendable and the device in front of him was intended for him just as much as it was his target. "This is a big hangar" he responded. "Maybe I just take cover in the far corner. Complete my mission and get off this station in the fray. Besides, I don't imagine that you would see it any other way than me being incarcerated if we were both to survive this now" Mahlyk said.

"I will let you in on a little secret. I am not an Alpha Quadrant species. If you speak to the one who will destroy you, I am a non-entity. I am not Alpha Quadrant or Delta Quadrant. Therefore, I am neither friend nor foe." DW 250 held up and offered a pair of wire cutters to Mahlyk. "You can run, and I will cut a random wire. You may or may not survive the blast, depending on how fast you can run, but you will still be trapped in the hanger. Or you can cut the trigger, and we both survive, and I will not stand in the way of you seeking what ever retribution you want, off this station, on those

that put you in this position. I am willing to bet you know who that is."

"You have a gift for hyperbole. And dramatics." Came the voice of the still-open comm channel. "I am well aware of your origin. And have co-opted the Nal'Gaharay mission."

Mahlyk thought for a moment. His reputation among the seedier side of the galaxy had been well founded and intact for a long while now. This one bad turn could land him either with a mark on his resume that would most likely leave him with countless difficulties finding the work that he had become so adept at, or could kill him here and now. It was not much of a decision, but it was still his. The thought of finding those responsible for sending him out to this end made him burn. He would see them fry at his own hand. He would stand over their lifeless corpses, and bask in the glory of revenge. Life. He would choose life. He quickly holstered his weapon and knelt down in front of the device, taking the tool from DW.

"I derive no pleasure from the forthcoming events. Despite my observing of you both to ensure the process is continued to my own design." The voice exhibited no undulation; no sign of excitement. It was the sort of voice one expects from a computer. Most programs have the imitation of emotion for the sake of the listener. The voice running through the hangar bay's comm system was devoid of emotion. "As a photonic being, I expect no particular actions. I will refrain from observing you, Mahlyk, if you wish to perform any end-of-life actions."

DW looked at Mahlyk. He picked up a PaDD and quickly typed out a question. 'Do you know who that is'? Meanwhile he said aloud. "This should be a simple electrical system problem, cut power to the dentonator."

Mahlyk read the PaDD and shook his head to the side. He prepared his tool on the wire that he was certain, from experience, was the

detonator. He found it funny, almost, that he had been on the other end of one of these devices countless times and never even considered the thought that he might find himself in the situation of having to diffuse one some day, yet here he was. "Ready" said Mahlyk.

DW nodded. "Timer is counting down.... I think it is time to make the cut." DW stood, and went to the front of the shuttle. When Mahlyk gave the signal, he would raise the shuttle shields. This would cut the comm link, until it could be re-established. If they refused the link, they could be secure within the shuttle.

"NOW" said Mahlyk, clipping the wire almost simultaneously. He looked up at DW in the nose of the craft.

The comm system chirped. An external override command was applied. The individual triggering the override re-established a partial comm link. "Quite a clever action. Isolating the ship fr--"

"We really do not need any more distractions." said DW calmly as he tapped at the console. It cut off communication with the Kilimanjaro and Sentinel Station.

The instigator of the current situation appreciated the computing knowledge of the photonic being. The communications re-link had been temporary. The segments of subroutine littered throughout had been systematically located, isolated and purged. Each attempt to access a system via a backdoor yielded failure. The photonic being named DW 250 had made short work of the long-term embedded hack. An unintended consequence was the photonic being isolating it's program to the USS Kilimanjaro. A more traditional explosive device could obliterate the runabout's computer core. Success need not be overly scrutinized.

"Well, Sir... Perhaps you can tell me what this is all about?" asked DW.

Mahlyk sighed, looking towards the front of the vessel at his intended target. He had never found himself a situation quite like this. His goal was usually to limit the amount of interaction he had with his mark. This was entirely new. For starters, his target was...unique. He didn't understand the motivation behind this job, though it was not his responsibility to do so. He familiarized himself with the fact that this MAY be his last job, at least of the sort he was most skilled at. "Someone really wants you eliminated" Mahlyk said, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I tend not to inquire much beyond the necessary information. It's not required for my line of work. It seems though, that I find myself in quite an interesting situation here. You, no doubt, have already decided when and how to relieve me of my freedom, and I do not blame you. I would, of course, do the same in your situation" said the assassin.

DW nodded. "I will speak on your behalf if you should become captured, but I have no plans to turn you over at this time." said DW. "You have not hurt anyone yet, Maedi still lives. It sounds like you were coerced into taking action. That is why I specified any revenge taken on our unknown subject needs to be performed off station." said DW. He did not know about Chang, or the others yet. "I would suspect, that eventually, your mysterious patron would eventually classify you as either not loyal enough, or a only marginally DQ enough for his ideals. Then there is no return to grace in his eyes. You will be exterminated as anyone else you have done to in the past." said DW. "But we are not the enemy. We may have differences, but we can learn to work together..." he said nodding to the bomb. "What do you say we deal with our pasts in the future and see if we can eliminate the threat to you, me, and Sentinel station in the immediate timeframe."

Mahlyk appreciated the logic of the Photonic being. They were quite different, himself and DW. He could see, however, how they could adapt to each other's company, at least long enough to survive their current predicament. "Very well" he responded.

"What is it that you have in mind?" he asked, looking at the device again.

"I suggest we neutralize this threat, then take steps to neutralize the threat from the unknown subject. That would be to both our benefit." said DW 250.

"The detonator is inoperable, at least by remote. We needn't worry about it fragmenting us into tiny pieces at the hand of our mysterious friend. What is your knowledge of such explosives?" he asked, curious about his strange new acquaintance and his knowledge and abilities. "Have you any experience or knowledge in the inner workings of such explosives?"

DW shook his head. "I am an engineer. I understand the logic of electronics and electrical systems, but I have not been trained in ordinance. I had to rely on your expertise to save us both."

Mahlyk chuckled at the thought. "I may exist through means that most would consider immoral, but I am not a bomb maker. I detonate them. That does not usually involve dismantling. I wish I could say otherwise. The wiring should be decipherable, though, especially since we're not on the sensitive clock we were so very recently."

DW ran through various scenarios, and found one that could possibly work for them. "Perhaps we should allow our unknown subject to think he or she has succeeded." said DW. "Then you could make contact, and we may be able to flush the this person out." said DW.

"Interesting" responded Mahlyk. "I am intrigued. Do go on" he said, temporarily forgetting about the highly explosive device setting at his feet.

"First we disable this bomb so that it cannot accidentally be set off. Then we open the link and you can tell your employer you have disabled the computer systems of Kilimanjaro, thereby destroying me."

"It COULD work" added Mahlyk. "We would be betting on the fact that our friend would not be monitoring any security frequencies and recognize the lack of chatter about the detonation. That's just to start. What would become of you in the meantime? You wouldn't be able to remain here. We would be easily discovered and our plot ruined" mused the assassin.

"I have a portable system that I can move to for the time being. Then we can meet up with your employer, you ostensibly to require a larger payment. They will want to eliminate you, so they will want the meeting."

"Right. Which we obviously cannot allow" Mahlyk said, his expression leading and intent on his photonic counterpart.

"We capture them first of course. Provide rehabilitation. And prevent further occurrences of malicious behavior." said DW 250 naively.

"Uhhuh" said Mahlyk in response. "Of course, they will not be willing to go quietly, and rehabilitation may prove to be....undesirable" he said.

"We will do what we can." said DW 250. "The safety of the station is paramount."

"And will your authorities be obliged to follow your line of action? Perhaps we should move this 'rehabilitation' off station as quickly as possible. You will not be surprised to hear that I do not wish to remain for any longer than is necessary. I do feel my time running out for Sentinel Station" Mahlyk admitted.

"Understandable." said DW. He knew Mahlyk would not likely stay long beyond an opening to escape. But if he provided access and information to the his employer, the trade off could be valuable.

"Nevertheless, the first course of action is this device" Mahlyk said, nodding towards the explosive. "Now, this is a fairly standard timed explosive. As you know, it is fitted with a remote detonator that was most likely installed as a failsafe, in case your attacker required to detonate before the desired time, ensuring success of their mission. Since we have taken away their ability to do so, if they are aware, they will be awaiting the timer's countdown. This we can use to our advantage. We will need to determine any additional failsafes in the electrical system, in case there are additional triggers defending the device against tampering. It is my belief that multiple failsafes were not required in this situation, however, I will let you scan the system and determine that yourself."

DW examined the device. The electrical circuits did not seem convoluted, and not overly redundant. Using a tricorder he rapidly mapped the circuits and displayed them on a nearby console. "This seems to be the active electrical circuits." said DW tracing the wires. This appears to be the detonator, with the wire you cut to prevent your employer from exploding the device prematurely." But this over here? It looks like a chronologic controller of some sort."

"Well, with the timer counting down, all that is needed is to trace the path of the detonation signal to the charge. We wish to let the timer run down in case they are monitoring that remotely. The timer will send the signal to the explosive charge, but if the signal is interrupted, there will be no detonation. This is, I believe, our first, best course to follow."

"That would be a clever ruse." agreed DW. "Tracing this output from the timer, it seems to track through here to the detontor."

said DW. I dont see any other side tracks coming in or out along the pathway." said DW. "Given that, it would seem that cutting this wire here would allow the timer to continue its countdown, but not have a way to send an electrical signal to the detonator, there by preventing the explosion."

Mahlyk studied the path of wiring DW had indicated. He was only slightly out of his element, never having needed to diffuse a device on a job. He very much wanted this device to not explode inside the ship where they were. The damage would be substantial, and he wanted, with great zeal, to locate those responsible for getting the better of him: a situation he planned to not repeat.

DW exposed the side of the device and isolated the wire. He handed Mahlyk a pair of wire cutters. "Would you care do to the honors?" asked DW.

Mahlyk smirked, taking the tool from DW. He carefully maneuvered them inside the shielding of the explosive, paying close attention to not make contact with any of the surrounding casing and wires, placing the desired wire in between the two edges of the cutter.

"We need to find who built this device, and who hired you." said DW as he assisted carefully pulling wires free to get better exposure of the circuitry.

He paused slightly, experiencing a slight twinge of doubt. He fought the urge to triple check the routing of the wire and forced his hand to execute the cut. He squinted slightly, just in case a life ending explosion were to ensue, as if it would have done him any good at all. A sense of relief washed over him when the silence continued. No explosion. No shrapnel. No death.

Mahlyk leaned back, embracing the relief. He wiped a drop of sweat from his forehead before agreeing with DW. "Yes, though I believe that once that timer hits zero, they will be all to curious

about what has happened here. Obviously there will be no explosion, no alarms and no mayhem. They will quickly discern that we have thwarted their plan. This will leave us only a small window in which to identify and locate them."

"You have any ideas?" asked DW.

"I can see one of two things" answered Mahlyk. "Number one, this unidentified orchestrator will want the last word. They will attempt contact for none other than to hear their own voice. Number two, they will quickly make their escape, in which case we will be at risk of losing them. How extensive are your scanning abilities? Will you be able to locate any transmission off the station, or track their attempt to escape, or leave should they do so?" he asked.

That was something DW could do. "You keep them talking, I could find the source of the transmission. I may even be able to get there." said DW.

Mahlyk looked at the timer that was still counting down. "We haven't much time" he added. "They will soon be aware of our success and we will find out."

"DW stood, and went to the cockpit controls. "Our adversary will want to cut into the communications, and not let us cut the channel as we did last time." said DW he stopped and looked over at Mahlyk. "We can use that to our advantage, by actually locking the channel open while I search for them." DW sat in the co-pilots seat awaiting the call. "You are an intelligent species. There is so much you could contribute to your society and the Delta Quadrant."

'Society' thought Mahlyk. Something he had not been a contributing member of. He thought it was odd, the attempt at swaying him towards a productive and legit existence. "As long as it's the DQ then, right?" he said.

"Not everyone from the AQ is an enemy." said DW. "There are those who are willing to fight for your people against enemies, such as the Borg."

"There will always be an enemy" responded Mahlyk. "And there will always be someone to oppose them. Men like me don't get involved, and there is reason for that."

DW inwardly sighed, he tried. "Doesn't look like it will be long now." said DW. The time count down to zero.

"The bomb has not detonated. To my disappointment. You are alive Mahlyk. To the detriment of the plan." The voice came through clearly. Despite the words, the voice remained monotone and unfeeling.

Mahlyk looked at DW, expecting him to have gone. It was now important that he go on his way. Mahlyk would do his part to keep the attention of whomever was on the other side of the channel.

DW gave Mahlyk a silent nod, and disappeared, going into the computer systems, following the transmission to it's source. If there were a holomitoor close by, he could appear, identify the culprits, and perhaps they could be apprehended.

"The photonic being is also alive. Based on the attempt to trace this signal to it's origin. How disappointing. That you two have decided to work towards a common goal. I repeat my disappointment Mahlyk. At this change of behavior. You were hired with specific intent." The voice paused momentarily. The open comm channel crackled. "And I was under the impression that you were entrusting the disposal of the being to me and my skills" Mahlyk retorted.

"The photonic being is particularly skilled. And has scrubbed the station's systems of several backdoor subroutines. I am aware of

it's intent to locate the source of this transmission. And, by corollary, locate me."

The communications channel chimed as it was cut.

Less than a minute later DW reappeared. "Who ever it was had gone." said DW. "This was a talented encryption artist. Carried me through a circuitous route. When I appeared, the comm station had already been vacated."

DW looked around. A beautiful speech, and no one to hear it. "Malhyk?"

The assassin had barely seen DW return. As he suspected, the saboteur's escape had been planned, and his window of opportunity slight. DW may have not been able to locate the one responsible on station, but there were few possibilities for a quick escape. He appreciated the trust the Photonic being had placed in him. It wasn't common in his line of work. He would have not been honest with himself if he'd said that the proposition he'd presented wasn't intriguing, but he if he knew one thing that he believed with all he was, it was that people are who they are and rarely are able to successful change that. This was the last thought that entered his mind, one that found it odd that his target would become someone to impact him, before he vanished from the ship.

Epilogue

A passenger ship pulled back from a docking strut. It turned in a slow arc in the direction of the wormhole.

A pair of Bynars stood at the transparent aluminum window watching the station.

^How unfortunate.^ one communicated to the other via the neural link that connected the individuals into a single mind.

^The photonic beings have proved extremely capable. And resilient in the face of imminent threat^ They shared simultaneously. As the thought was articulated, it's completeness was instantly formulated. ^With the boundary codes identified. It was a matter of time. Another solution must be pursued. To the photonic being plague.^

Mahlyk materialized on the passenger ship, prepared to take his revenge, or die trying. He approached the beings facing the viewport, his weapon drawn. He may have shown a minor and brief weakness while working with the Photonic being, but his resolve had never been greater, nor his belief in his natural abilities. There would be no change of heart for him. Not today, not tomorrow. He was he was. He approached the beings with intent. "Surprised to see me?" he asked, his finger on the trigger of his disruptor.

^This event was a possibility. Based on my projections.^ The Bynars looked to each other and back to Mahlyk, the assassin they had hired under false pretense. ^This will confirm the state of life as binary.^