

Kobaj frowned, and tapped the same command into the AI's interface again only to get another error back. That... didn't make sense, frankly; he'd done countless routine repairs and checkups on units similar to this one, *especially* after solar flare events.

Solar flares were when things on the ship tended to go out, and also when he earned his keep: anything related to the ship itself or "official business" had to be done on the clock, but the personal effects of the other crewmembers - computers, relays, personal companions, whatever - were on his own time, as a little something extra.

Except *this* cycle he'd had to turn down all extra requests and keep the door to his quarters closed with the window-panel partially drawn, simply because this damn AI problem had baffled him since the captain had sent it his way with an attached notice marking it as urgent. The light from the Vulpes spaceport outside his window, all done up like a galaxy of its own, provided more than enough to work by, and then there was the soft blue glow reflected from the Earth below that... but he had to often remind himself not to get distracted with the sights. After all of this, he still wouldn't be able to turn in for at least four more hours.

One of the fennec's tall ears started repeatedly flicking, and then the other did as well - and he looked away from the screen to see the roof of his quarters floating a bit close. Or, rather, himself coming close to the roof. There was no gravity on this ship, the Herald's Reach; things and people tended to drift if not fastened in. That had been the hardest thing to get used to after starting his position here, but then he'd quickly found that it really came in handy when doing miscellaneous repairs around the ship. He twisted himself just slightly and braced his shoulders against the cool metal, giving enough of an impulse to reverse his drift.

A gentle green light at the edge of his armband - a miniature, portable computer in itself and a requirement for every Federation member on government or military duty - pulsed slowly, signalling that he had a few new messages... which he had pointedly been ignoring in favor of focusing on the AI itself. Thing was, this programming was so complex and in-depth that it took the combined processing power of all his armband, his official work computer, and his extra personal computer to fish through it, and he still hadn't found anything close to the root of the problem.

When he said he'd worked on units similar to this one... well, that was a pretty broad definition of *similar*. That is, he'd worked on independent, redundant AI units before, but those were like kindergarteners while *this* one was like the scientists who had developed the very armband-computer he used. Other units usually functioned within a certain set of parameters and expectations, much like the individual crewmembers of the ship: one does the repairs, one maintains the ship's interior climate, one runs the hydroponics, one maintains the basic fundamental defenses. Yet as far as Kobaj could tell this one, referred to as Halsey by the ship captain, could do all of that and more.

That wasn't really the impressive part, though: what shocked him when he first plugged the little box's interfacing cables into his armband's receiver was the sheer processing power and

capability packed into the thing, revealed in the performance readouts and interior specs. Even frazzled and half-dead after the solar flare licked into its circuits, it could still process twice as much as his own armband could, with five times the speed. All of that power packed into a small black box, not more than 5 inches on each side.

While his other auxiliary computers attempted to root through Halsey's memory banks and pinpoint the error, the fennec fox had been poking around, trying to find a way to tap into that potential and use it to run the maintenance on itself. However, the advanced AI redundancy didn't make it easy: for every process this unit could do, it had three or four subroutines or reroutes to fire in place of error, and this security prevented him from hijacking the processing power for his own. That meant that for now, all he could do was pore over the readouts and scans that scrolled over his screen, just about unintelligible even with his skill and experience.

For just about every other unit that he'd worked on, internal security was often the first thing to go in the event of hardware or power failure, in favor of keeping the data intact and free of corruption. Halsey seemed to be clinging tight to its inner workings, which honestly just made things more difficult for the fennec; if he could just - *take a look* without having to bypass all these second-measures, he might've found the issue already.

This redundancy, the security systems, everything else... if he hadn't known better, he would've thought that this one had something to hide.

Usually a solar flare tended to interrupt the various read-write cycles, or demagnetize (or overmagnetize) some important component of the circuitry, or on rare occasions corrupt the mainframe itself, all of which rendered the code unreadable and often required a full wipe and rewrite. Kobaj took quite a bit of solace in knowing that since he was still able to navigate these countless lines, none of these had happened. Or, at least, not entirely.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the notification blinker on his armband now alternated green for the messages, and yellow for an important alert from his maintenance routines. The fennec turn his attention to his other screens above, eyes flicking back and forth over the scrolling text, and then raised his arm... and pushed his foot against the floor to yet again reverse his drift.

A new error code had popped up, but this one didn't make sense either. Not in the context of the current situation. After a moment of consideration, he shook his head and swiped it away - but before another cycle of the debugging routine passed it popped right back up, the text box *pinging* into view of the holographic interface suspended above the armband itself.

Partition DE-45-11, section 453, line 8102... the fox looked back over to one of his other screens and typed in a command to skip down to that portion, and then sat back as much as he could in the lack of a chair or gravity. That definitely looked like corrupted code to him, but it wasn't the cleanup protocol of his maintenance routine that caught it: rather, it had been the reading and delimiting process itself. After several years of working with various computational

interfaces, Kobaj liked to think he'd refined that routine to be able to recognize and catch corrupted partitions without the hiccups that used to throw off his systems... but this didn't behave like anything he'd seen before. Not at all.

After another moment of contemplation and looking over the section - and it went on and on and on - he realized: that wasn't a *hey, this part's broke to hell* alert. This was a *hey, I don't know what the shit this is but I know it shouldn't be here* alert. This code, that text, and these glyphs, the way it was all organized, and how it flowed, the way none of this read correctly in any of his programs... and this section wasn't integrated in a standard way with any other parts of the AI repository. This was something written into the unit itself in a way that his systems had no idea how to read; this was something sealed into the drywall itself, where he was trying to find and patch cracks.

Goodness. The fennec rolled his head back a little bit, and accidentally bumped it against one of the overhead storage compartments along the ceiling of his room. After looking through all of that and trying to find something for the past several hours, which he now realized had been him chasing his own damn tail, he *really* needed a break. Without another thought, he brought his arm in front of him again, paused the maintenance routine, swiped everything away, and then opened up his messages-

*"Hey you! I just got the notification that the Herald's Reach docked here at Vulpes. That's your ship, right? I'd love it if you could drop on by for a visit! You know I've been aching to see you!"*

That was from Serathano, a long-time friend of his. The two had actually met on one of the fox's first assignments with the Federation, back when all he did was manual maintenance (i.e., janitor) on a place that was pretty much the stellar equivalent of a ground-level gas station. The tall and fit white tiger had strolled in, purchased a coffee, and then leaned against the wall and spoke to the fennec, all the while maintaining a calm smile between sips. Not three minutes after he left, the Intergalactic Police Force burst into the station looking for a tiger that matched his description perfectly.

Then two days after that, Kobaj found himself on a shuttle to a larger spaceport, similar to the Vulpes here... and once again found Serathano sitting across from him, the same grin on his face. The fennec inquired about the police raid, and Serathano gave him the tilted-head and hanging-jaw that functioned as a silent *I have no idea what you're talking about*, but there was the slightest of glimmers in his eye that made Kobaj wonder.

Then it was two weeks after that in an entirely different star system where Kobaj received one of his first freelance repair calls, and showed up at the location of interest only for the door to open to show that same white tiger, this time clad in an egg-blue bathrobe and luxurious silks beneath, standing on the other side... and again with that same happy expression on his face.

That was when their friendship had really started, with Kobaj working through the suspiciously-obscure machinery that the tiger had given to him there. Once he'd finished that job, he

received his payment and went on his way, only to receive another call from Serathano again the following week for something else... and then again, and again. After their sixth such meeting, Serathano gave the fox a custom-tweaked armband, a few individual pieces and modules of which Kobaj recognized from the tiger's calls throughout the weeks. Normally he would've refused the gift, in part because he figured it would be hell jumping through all the hoops to get this non-regulation device approved by the upper management (and, really, it was), but the thing worked faster and smoother than anything else he'd used up until that point. After wearing it for a bit, the device even began to predict Kobaj's information entries and requests, as if it had some integrated pseudo-intelligence woven into the circuitry.

After that, Kobaj kept in contact with Serathano; seeking the cat out and purposefully paying him visits whenever their spheres of exploration overlapped. Looks like this would be another of those times, since he was *really* at the end of his rope here.

It took a few more minutes to shut down everything he had running, and then safely untether all his systems from one another; during all of this, he thought about just how he'd do this. Really, *technically*, he wasn't supposed to leave while on the clock, and *technically* it was illegal to remove something like Halsey from the ship without direct permission from the captain, but... what other choice did he have? If he didn't get this fixed, and soon, the captain would have his hide. He stuffed the box into his bag along with an extra jacket to cover it, slung it over his shoulder as best he could in the lack of gravity, then did another scan through his quarters before hitting the button to open the door out to the hall. When he next raised his arm, his armband skipped to the next message:

*"Yeah, I just tracked the position of your computer here - you are at Vulpes! Come pay me a visit, why don't you!"*

God. Kobaj rolled his eyes, thankful for that little quip; seeing Serathano would relieve at least some of this burden weighing down on him. The fennec just had to avoid eye contact with the other workers as he floated towards the docks. It was a simple ferry system back and forth between docked ships and the Vulpes, with the intent of minimizing overlap and competition of gravity fields, which of course was irrelevant in the case of the Herald's Reach. Only thing about it was that Kobaj had to record his name, ID number, and time of departure, which meant that this little not-exactly-legal excursion would have written record.

The interface quickly verified his credentials, and the door to the ferry pod hissed open. Would probably be good to let Serathano know he was taking him up on that offer; this time when he raised his arm, the holographic projection switched to the Reply interface, *I'll be there* already written into the field. He appended a quick inquiry to the end of that before sending it: *Where can I find you this time?*

The tiger's reply came in almost before he'd set his arm back at his side. This part of the transit ride was always the weirdest, when the outer edges of the Vulpes's gravity field just barely started to grasp onto him and his things and pull them down. Kobaj quickly stuffed his paws

back into his bag, making sure that Halsey's containment unit would land on the jacket for cushioning.

*"Same as last time, The Slimy Lizard bar in the same sector as the docks. I'll get things ready for ya. See you there."*

Vulpes was fairly large when it came to spaceports, in terms of both physical size as well as resident population. Both of these could be seen through the port window of the ferry, sleek steel of the spaceport twinkling in a thousand different places with lights and windows and who knows what else. Like a hive, always bustling, always in action, little pods and smaller ships constantly coming and going both to the Earth's surface below and further out into space, the intersectional on-station transit system buzzing all across the surface of the station.

Every inhabited and Federation-controlled planet had an accompanying station, with Earth's being unsurprisingly among the largest... and the one orbiting Kobaj's home planet one of the smallest, hardly larger than the Herald's Reach itself. Actually - the fennec looked through the rear port window at the retreating ship - smaller, probably. Grand total of two docks at his home planet's station, sized for triple- and quad-A class ships (very small and pocket-size, respectively). When he'd been accepted for his position aboard the Herald's Reach, he'd actually had to hop on a transport ship to another spaceport outside his home system, and then board from there.

Now that he was thinking about it... the fennec opened his armband's interface again and tapped out a note to himself. *Visit home on next vacation*. It'd been a few years, and certainly would be nice to see how things had changed.

The bump and rattle of the ferry docking in the station brought him back out of his thoughts, and he stuffed his bag under his arm and held it close to his body. The door of the pod opened on its own and he climbed out, wobbling for a moment with the briefly-unfamiliar sensation of palpable gravity keeping him down. After long enough of going back and forth between environments, though, he'd gotten fairly used to that transition, and had reclaimed most of his mastery of balance by the time he'd left and made his way into the main concourse of the sector.

Places like this were really where the diversity of the Federation could be seen. Fairly early on in its history, Vulpes had been designated as its own nation of Earth, reflecting its population size: people *lived* here, were born here, died here. And it certainly felt like a small planet all its own, looking at the sheer number of different types bustling through the sector, talking in their small groups or focusing on the holographic projections before them.

If given the opportunity, Kobaj would have loved to find a railing to lean against and just... *watch*. That had been the first thing he'd done when he'd arrived at that larger spaceport, back when he first joined; more people in one place than he'd ever before seen. Actually, he'd almost ended up missing his ride out, and only made it thanks to a rather... *generous* station attendant.

But. Different time, different circumstances. The fennec shook his head and continued on his way, taking care to look around at the directories standing near intersections and the signs above, each in an array of different languages. Last time the Herald's Reach had docked here was... probably three months ago now, on the Federation standardized calendar. Back then Serathano's bar was pretty much just a hardly-legal side-project, little more than an alcohol kiosk out in the concourse.

So, naturally, he had to do a double-take when he noticed *The Slimy Lizard* listed on one of those overhead signs, somewhat humorously noted as the exact same in all the other listed languages. As he came closer, his first thought was - not *much* of an improvement, but an improvement nonetheless. A little door off from the main hallway, like someone had redecorated a maintenance access corridor.

At least, that's what it looked like at first. As soon as the fennec pushed through that door, a wave of cool, sweet air washed over him and tickled at his whiskers, and the characteristic heady scents of alcohol mixed with flavored smoke mixed with... something else, something that made his nose twitch and that gave him the slightest of sweet shivers. Compared to outside in the station, the noise in here was louder yet lower, a self-contained rumbling that kept his tall ears constantly swiveling around, catching bits and pieces of different conversations not entirely in languages he understood, unfamiliar voices.

A lot more here than he first thought from looking at the nondescript entrance, and it seemed that Serathano certainly knew how to use the space he'd been given. Everything looked and felt compact and efficient without being uncomfortable, looking at the arrangement of the tables, the lights that hung close to the ceiling, the rows of illuminated bottles on display. A set of doors lined the far wall, kept watch by a few other tigers who every now and then escorted someone inside, then came back out to resume their post. That was a bit odd.

Before he could ponder too much on it, though, the fur along the back of Kobaj's neck tingled - and he looked first to his left, then to his right, then to his left again... and saw that familiar feline face strolling through the crowd towards him, head-and-shoulders above just about everyone else and with that very same relaxed smile across his muzzle.

"*There* he is!" Serathano rumbled, glass of wine clutched easily in one paw. He took a sip from it as he approached, then got bumped by someone passing by, and swiftly lapped the stray drop off his lips. "Was wondering when you'd drop by. What brings you here?"

The white tiger's low voice came perfectly clear even through all the droning noise and the thumping music beneath. Kobaj leaned in a little closer, holding his tail close to his body so as to keep it from getting trampled. A bit idly, he reached down and patted his bag to make sure that everything was still there; on *another* occasion he'd had his Federation ID card taken right out of his back pocket without him noticing, and he had to wait two whole cycles before he managed to get his identity verified to board his ship again... so that he could retrieve the spare card he kept in his quarters.

“Well, I mean, you invited me-”

“Yes, and you’re supposed to be-” Serathano pointed up into the air with his other paw. “-up there on your ship right now, aren’t you? So you’ve got your own reason for visiting. Though I *do* appreciate it, you know.”

Kobaj glanced around, and swallowed. This wasn’t exactly the place to talk about this; he didn’t yet have a “one time I ran into my ship captain when neither of us were supposed to be off-duty” story, but he didn’t want this to be when that happened. “Got somewhere we can talk? I, uh, have a... *thing* I need you to look at.”

The tiger took another sip from his wine, and rolled the liquid around in his mouth before swallowing it down. Also like usual, he wore that same light-blue bathrobe and looked totally uninterested in what other people thought of him for it. Of course, he could afford to that: Serathano probably had about twice the mass on him in muscle that Kobaj had to his entire body.

“Ah, of course. A *thing*, huh.” He turned and started back through the crowd, and waved for Kobaj to follow him. “Technological in nature, probably?”

“Yeah. *Very* technological.”

“Oh fox, I’ve got things set up back in my room for something like this.”

That reminded him. “Oh - y’know, Serathano, I don’t really appreciate you tracking my position-”

Thick, hearty laugh from the tiger, enough to cause a few other people to look over. “Sorry! Sorry. I just get excited when my friends visit. Besides, that computer on your arm is about sixty percent my own tech, remember? You’ve got one, I’ve got one, my grandma way out in Horsehead has one. Keep tabs on people I care about, yeah? Anyway-”

He led the fox through some hallways down back, all lined with doors. These had windows set into them, which had been conspicuously blacked out; Kobaj thought he could hear some suspicious noises from behind those doors, but didn’t really pay it enough mind. Soon the noises of that as well as the louder rumble of the bar’s patrons fell to something that just barely tickled at his ears, and Serathano turned another corner, tapped in a passcode to a keypad, then tapped in another passcode to another keypad... and then stood back as a panel on the wall right beside another door slid open.

That was *one* way to keep things secret. False wall, false door.

“What’ve you got?”

Kobaj stepped into the hidden room - and then paused, just looking around at everything. Plush carpet, walls done over in smooth lacquered hardwood, an entire corner of the place devoted to computer screens and server racks, lights blinking all different colors and at least four different keyboards stacked atop one another. Looked like something out of an old sci-fi movie.

Serathano sidled over to a miniature refrigerator beside the king-size bed on the clear other side of the room, and set his wine glass there.

The fennec found his voice. "How long have-"

"A few months! Actually had this whole thing in progress last time you came by, but... wasn't ready for public eyes. Just finished getting everything moved last month, and then opened the storefront..." Serathano shrugged. "Planning to take over that dippy little knick-knack shop out along the concourse. Give The Slimy Lizard an actual respectable entrance instead of this little broom closet door."

Kobaj swung his bag around to his front and dug his paws in. "And where did you get the..."

"The money? Well, I mean, same place I get it for everything else." Another shrug, and nothing more. "Now, c'mon - thing? You've got me exci-"

The tiger trailed off as soon as Kobaj brought the black box out into view, sharp edges and corners perfect in their construction, faces totally smooth other than the I/O ports but entirely matte. The fennec waited for a response, but when he looked up at the tiger, only found those gold eyes to be focused firmly on that box in his paws. Slowly, Serathano looked up at him, one finger pointing to Halsey.

"You're not supposed to have that, are you?"

Kobaj shrugged. "Well, I mean, a solar flare messed it up and the captain asked me to fix it, so-"

"Yeah, but, *this* - ship-grade AI, right? Like, the thing that runs the whole show?"

"I mean... yeah?"

Serathano took a few steps forward, and held his paws out. "Can I...?"

"Don't drop it." Kobaj settled it into those large paws, and watched as the tiger first took a closer look at it, and then brought it over to his computers.

"Course not. That'd cost me more money than I've accumulated and spent throughout my entire life... let's see, cable, cable, where is..."

The fennec dug back into his bag. "I've got one, if you-"

“Thank you. So you said it was a solar flare?”

“Yeah, but, like - that’s something I could fix on my own. That’s not the problem, though.”

“Of course it’s not... um...” The tiger slid one of those keyboards out and tapped into it. Kobaj recognized the screen that came up above Serathano’s armband as the same one that he’d been greeted with when he’d first cracked Halsey open. “Ah. I can see what you mean. I mean, there *is* the solar flare damage there, but that... goodness, why is this thing behaving like this?”

“That’s what I wanted your help with! That, and I - found something-”

“You found something! Of course. This type of unit is always full of surprises.” Serathano slid that first keyboard right back in, and then pulled out the one above it. That one looked like it had about twice as many keys as it should’ve had. As he typed, the tiger glanced back over his shoulder. “You can - sit down, if you like. Have you ever heard of a back-to-back book?”

“I don’t think so.” The fennec took another look around the spacious cabin, then made his way over to the bed and settled his weight onto it. The mattress sank down directly beneath where he sat, and nowhere else.

“It’s something from ancient history, pretty much. It’s a book, where you can read it forwards, get one story out of it... then flip it over and read it backwards, and get an entirely different story out of it. Have you - done anything with AI like this before?”

“I mean, sort of?”

“Mm. So you haven’t.” Serathano reached over to grab another cable, and plugged that one into a port along the underside of his own armband. The holographic interface fizzled for a second, then melded from rich green into smooth amber. “You’d know if you had. The reason I mentioned the book - those other AI you’ve worked with, think of those like regular-ass books, right? Read ‘em forwards, they got one thing to tell you. That’s it.”

As he listened, Kobaj still looked around the room. Wood and furniture like this would be very expensive to import, unless it had all been synthesized on-station as a much cheaper, and much less reliable method, but knowing Serathano... “Alright...”

“You’ve worked on defense AI, right? I think the Intergalactic Alliance Police contacted you once?”

“Yeah. That was a hell of a contract.”

“Think of that as a two-fold back-to-back. Forwards and backwards. Bit more complex. What you’ve got here...” Beneath the tiger’s voice, the machinery of the computers whirred steadily faster and louder, sounding almost like a set of freestanding fans. It blocked out the residual

sounds from outside in the bar. “Is like that but in three dimensions. *At least*. And - was this what you found?”

A few more taps, and Serathano brought up his screen in a larger projection facing out towards the bed. Kobaj scanned over it, then looked through the text at the tiger over in the corner.

“Yeah. That’s exactly it. What even is that?”

Serathano leaned over his keyboards again, typed in some more, tapped a few more things... and then Kobaj watched the glyphs and text shift and mold into something new, something a bit more recognizable. He straightened up and read the text as it followed through on the projection.

Then, he blinked. “Wait. Wait, wait, wait.”

“You were reading that book front to back. To *really* see what was there, what you had to do was... read it back to front.” Serathano stood to his full height and braced his paws on his hips, his armband’s screen projecting out at an angle. “Or, I guess, kind of diagonally and downwards from behind. Metaphorically speaking.”

“So...” The more he read over it, the less sense it made. “What is it? And - do you think this is related to the solar flare?”

“Solar flare? No, not at all.” The tiger swiped all those projections off, and did a few things more on yet another keyboard. Halsey’s container rattled on the desk a little bit, then sat still. “Well. As far as I can tell, maybe? Kind of? You found what the solar flare did, right?”

“Yeah, it...” Kobaj waved a paw. “Interrupted the memory cycles. That was easy enough.” Like a power surge, briefly knocking an appliance out of commission. “I just couldn’t figure out why that messed it up so much.”

“Well, it shouldn’t have! And it didn’t. The solar flare wasn’t what did this; this was here before. This thing is trying to go through its standard reboot, but then it runs into *that* block of hooey, and it doesn’t know what to do about it. And if an AI of *this* level and complexity can’t figure a safe way around it... then you know it’s gotta be woven deep, *deep* in there.”

“I guess so.” That made sense enough. The fennec canted his head. “How, um, how do you-”

“How do I know this?” Serathano paused. Halsey emitted a low whirring, lit up along its faces, then went dark... and pulsed weakly back to life. The tiger grinned and unplugged it from his various interfaces, then slid it into his arms and handed it back over to Kobaj. “I’ve seen something like that before. *Really* wanted to get my mitts on it, but, uh... a squad of rifle barrels pointed at a guy is enough to dissuade even me, y’know? What you’ve got in that box there looks like instructions. So you know what to do now, right?”

For some reason Halsey felt slightly heavier when Kobaj settled it back into his lap. The box vibrated sleepily beneath his touch, hazy lights beneath previously-invisible slits in the surfaces pulsing in rhythm. "I give it a jolt to get the memory processes back on track, then hand it back over to the captain without sticking my nose where it doesn't belong? I mean, you said yourself, a squad of rifle barrels..."

Something else driving his motivation, too, something that he kept closer to himself: he thought the captain was cute. Slight, slim cheetah, not really at all what one would expect from a commander of a ship in the class of the Herald's Reach; Kobaj remembered the look on his face when he'd *personally* handed Halsey to him, nervous urgency masked beneath a brighter charismatic smile. *I'm tasking you with this since I know you can get it done*, the captain had said, and pressed Halsey into Kobaj's paws. Then, he reached down and folded the fox's fingers over the top of the box. *I've got faith in you*.

"Well, sure, you *could* do that. But think about it: what you're seeing here, these weird... symbols, I guess - they come together to form a special type of code." Serathano half-crouched in front of him and tapped a claw against the top surface. Halsey responded by vibrating a little stronger. "*Instructions*, Kobaj. Like a treasure map! If that's the truth of this, you could find out where they lead."

He wrapped his arms more firmly around the box. Now it gave off a steady, gentle warmth. "Or it could be a trap."

"Hidden inside the circuits of a shipwide AI? Kobaj, this thing is by far the most complex of its type I've ever seen. And that's saying something! What you've got here, whatever it is those instructions tell that thing to do - it was likely hidden for a reason." About halfway through him saying this, the same notification light at the edge of Serathano's armband started blinking rapidly, bright red. He noticed, glanced down, looked over at his other computers, turned back around to get back to typing.

Kobaj rose to his feet. "So you're saying I should... leave it right where it is and pretend I never noticed it."

The tiger pointed down to the floor by his feet. "Actually, now that I'm thinking about it - grab that cable there and plug it into your box. I'll see about copying that section and getting it onto your armband so you can look at it on your own. I *believe* that it's some kind of sequence for your AI to run-

"That's what I thought, too, looking at it." Kobaj's ears flicked back towards the "door" of their own accord. Through the false panel, the sounds from outside had... changed, somewhat. The music still thumped, but there was less conversation, more... something else. Whispering, rustling, clattering.

“-and whatever these instructions do, it’ll take a *lot* of power to execute, probably... the same amount it’d take to power an entire sector of this spaceport, looking at the numbers. That much is clear. Um...” Now one of the other screens started to flash, as well as a few of the lights along the panels... “Actually. Gonna have to stick a pin in that idea and leave it for now. Kobaj, you’ve gotta get out of here.”

That didn’t sound good. The fennec looked down at the box humming and glowing in his paws for a moment longer, then swung his bag back around and stuffed it down safely inside. “What? Why? What’s going on?”

“Well, remember how we talked about your defense AI contract for the IAP just a moment ago?”

Kobaj watched while Serathano systematically started shutting down his systems. He’d never seen the tiger so animated before. “Yes...”

“Well, how should I put this... my bouncers just told me that they’re here. And I’m not saying they’re here for you, since honestly they’re probably here for me, but if they *are* here for you, well - it’s probably not to sign another contract.” He straightened up and jerked his thumb over his shoulder, back towards the corner of the room opposite his setup. “Door back there, behind the curtain. Takes you into the maintenance access of the station; from there you should be able to either lose ‘em if they follow you, or find a quick way out. I’m sorry we had to cut this short - I’ll keep in touch, okay?”

Didn’t have to tell him twice. Kobaj slung his bag over his shoulder again and strode across the room towards that curtain, the portion of the wall surrounding it made to look conveniently like a window of a terrestrial house. “What are you gonna do?”

“Stall? It’s a win-win no matter which of us they’re here for. I didn’t get this far without knowing my way around the law, and they themselves are already breaking two or three just by raiding this bar today... so!” He waved Kobaj out.

Past that curtain and through that door... was thick darkness lit only by the occasional yellow-orange maintenance light, and rickety steel scaffolding sticking out of the sides of the walls and structural supports. Larger ships like Vulpes Spaceport were often constructed with large pockets of empty space between the modules and rooms in order to minimize damage and venting in the rare event of a hull breach, and also to provide a sort of “crumple zone” under more catastrophic circumstances.

“I’ll be behind you. Eventually.” The tiger pushed him out into the cooler maintenance section, and Kobaj scrambled to grab onto the handrail. “Maybe. Don’t wait up, okay? You get back to your ship and pretend like nothing happened. I’ll contact you!” Before he turned to run, the last thing that caught his eye was that same self-assured smile lifting the white tiger’s lips.

...and when the door shut behind him, the noise echoed throughout the empty area. The fennec took a breath, swallowed, looked around in the darkness... and then started on his way, acutely aware of the silence out here. Been a long time since he'd heard silence so complete. Vulpes wasn't one of the stations he'd worked on in his time coming up the ladder, but, he figured... couldn't be *that* different.

The maintenance section here should, ideally, make its way along the exterior of all the rooms of the sector with entrances into the back of each one. Those entrances were of course out of bounds to him: not only was it illegal to take a shortcut through the access sections, but he didn't have the key to any of these. Thankfully, at the intersection of each sector module - that was the important thing to remember: the larger Federation ships got, the more simplistic and repetitive their designs became - would be an easy way out. As long as he continued along this scaffold, he should be able to just slide out there and then make his way back to the docks.

That was the ideal scenario, and of course what he *actually* faced was different. No sooner had he passed the next section did he realize that his plan wouldn't quite work out: Vulpes's maintenance area deviated from what he was used to. Instead of continuing along the exterior, here the floor and hallway suddenly turned towards the outer hull of the station, and then ended with a shielded ladder climbing up towards the top of the module and then further down... and the fennec wasn't particularly keen on turning around and going the other way, so he squeezed his bag at his side to make sure everything was still there, and started down the ladder.

His ears noticed the movement before the rest of him did, and then he paused halfway down; the sounds, the vibrations through the metal... there was definitely someone coming this way. Several someones, running. Catching up quickly. Brief moment of panic, of indecision, of questioning... and then he missed one of the rungs beneath him and scrambled to keep from falling back, and that made the decision for him. Next thing he knew he was running along the lower level of the scaffolding, one arm clamped over his bag while the other kept hold of the handrail.

*"There's someone down there!"* he heard, from behind him. *"They're running! Hey - hey, you! Stop! This is the Intergalactic Alliance P-"*

Rattling, clanging, banging, his own heart in his ears, the grating rush of breath in his throat. Weird how hardly thirty minutes ago he'd been floating easily around in his quarters back aboard the Herald's Reach, and now he was... *somewhere* in the backwards bowels of the Vulpes station, *fleeing from the police* with technically-stolen advanced AI tech under his arm.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, an amused little voice: *this is how interesting stories start*. Except Kobaj didn't think of himself as any kind of hero. He was just a fennec fox, repairman aboard a minor double-A class ship for the Federation, who had... *maybe* gone to the wrong place for help with this problem of his.

Well. No, it wasn't Serathano's fault. Kobaj rounded a corner and then tried to skitter to a stop, or else plow right into the handrail cutting across the scaffold as it reached the end of its path there. He lost his footing and almost fell over, and then had to push his free arm down against the floor to get himself back up to his feet. If anything, it was his own fault for thinking this involved him, and for trying to get to the bottom of it, and *especially* for thinking he could get away with swiping Halsey off of the ship and bringing it down here, and now-

Another dead end, which meant that he'd run himself into a corner. No ladder here to save him; just a single locked door. Once more the scaffolding beneath him started to shake and rattle with the approaching police, and for a second Kobaj had literally nowhere else to go. So he just - stood there for a second, paws squeezing tight around the railing behind him, Halsey chittering quietly in his bag and against his leg.

Wait. *Halsey*. Kobaj's tall ears perked up, and he started rooting through his bag. Serathano had mentioned that if he could get the damn thing to run the code, it'd take an immense amount of power... which meant he might be able to knock out the door security systems here, and possibly give himself an escape.

There was the box itself in his bag, the jacket he'd grabbed, a few miscellaneous papers and things that he'd forgotten to clean out... whatever all Serathano had done while inspecting the AI had given it enough power to get over some of the block caused by that weird section. It was *really* a stretch, but maybe if he could... just... get it plugged into his armband again, he might be able to force something more into it to really revive it and then get to that command.

Perhaps? Maybe? Was that even how circuitry like this worked? The fennec blinked against a bright flashlight beam suddenly shining into his face from further down, and fumbled with getting the the cable plugged into Halsey and his armband. The holographic interface popped up, giving the same *Run maintenance routine?* that he'd sent it through before. That wouldn't work. He'd have to whip up something fast here, something that very well could knock his armband out of commission until he could get it back to Serathano for repairs. And who knows when that would be.

*"Hey! You there! Stop what you're doing! You're not in trouble, we just want to-"*

Yeah. Sure. Kobaj glanced up through the projection; that flashlight was aimed at him from beneath a raised rifle barrel. Halsey's lights had started glowing a little brighter when he'd plugged it into his armband, soft and calm amid the chaos around him and the pounding in his own chest. He had the boot command all typed out, all that he had left to do was...

...to send it.

Nothing at first. His breath caught in his throat. Then, the holographic interface above his armband blinked, displayed a big ? in a circle, and went dark... and Halsey did, too, lights dying and little noises and movements coming to a standstill. Not a second later, though, the fennec's

armband screen blinked back to life, and the holographic interface - moved, and twisted, and took a shape similar to that of the box he clutched under his arm, though maintained the same short distance from the screen itself. One brighter point of light opened on the near side, and seemed to come around and look at Kobaj.

“Hello,” Halsey said, calm and courteous. Musical, almost. “I don’t recognize this interface. Where are we?”

Kobaj looked up again: now there were three officers coming his way, walking slowly, rifles still raised. He took a shaky step back, but bumped against the railing.

“Um - that’s - unimportant. I need you to-”

“Where is the captain?” That projected box turned around, looked at the approaching officers, and then spun back to Kobaj. “This looks like a hostage situation. Attempting to raise the alarm...” the singular eye in the projected box appeared to squint and then grow flustered. “That’s odd. This interface cannot establish a connection. Where are we?”

“It’s not a hostage situation! The - the captain entrusted me to repair you, after you were-overloaded by a solar flare-”

Short pause, during which the AI hummed a little tune. “Oh. Yes, that is in accordance with my records. You are Kobaj, then?”

“Yes! N-”

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance. You know, the captain speaks of you often.”

That interrupted Kobaj’s train of thought, and it took him a moment to find where he was beneath the growing blush. “I - now, please - there is a section inside your code, it’s encrypted or something, special instructions, I need you to - run that! Whatever it says! Execute!” If it didn’t open the door, which it *hadn’t* yet, then the fox hoped and wished that it would at least do *something* to his benefit.

That point of light slimmed down into a slit. Kobaj had never had an AI glare at him before. “Are you authorized to know about that?”

“I mean, I assumed when the captain handed you over to me for repair, I-”

*“Stop what you are doing now!”*

“Oh!” Halsey looked around again. “Time-sensitive! The captain authorized me to undertake any actions necessary to ensure my safe return to the ship. We must take a detour.”

“A detour? What are y-”

“*Stop! Now!*”

More humming. “Let me just...” This time, Halsey directed its one eye towards a nearby access panel, and then looked up at Kobaj again. “You wouldn’t happen to have peripheral link cables, would you? If so, would you be so kind as to plug your... interface... into that slot? I must borrow power.”

*Serathano was right*, the fennec thought to himself, almost dropping the cable in his nervousness: he *really* didn’t do well with guns pointed at him. With one end of the wire plugged into his armband and Halsey, he scrambled to plug the other into the panel - and as soon as the head made contact with the slot, he thought that the police had opened fire. There was bright, blinding light, sharp pain along his wrist and upper arm, a weird sense of pressure squeezing in on him from all sides, the sense of losing his balance, nausea, dizziness.

Then, all of that left him, as quickly as it had come. He reached out to grab onto the railing... but instead swiped his paw through open air, comfortably warm, and with a gentle breeze whispering through his fur. The light shining into his eyes was no longer the blinding glare from flashlights, but rather the smooth glow of a white sun through clouds overhead; instead of shaky rickety steel beneath his feet, now he stood in a field of tall grasses reaching up to tickle at his calves and knees with firm soil beneath. Other than soft wind blowing through the fields around him and the occasional twittering call of some kind of creature he didn’t recognize, the only sound that met his ears was Halsey’s continued humming, a slow, steady tune.

This wasn’t Vulpes, or the Herald’s Reach, or... well, really *anywhere* he recognized. The fennec lowered his arms to his sides, and realized he no longer needed to tuck his tail between his legs. He looked around, at the mountains in the distance, at the unfamiliar architecture undulating between the valleys, at the tree-like plants that rose out of the grasses around him, at the animals that glided by on the warm air, at the miniscule white sun through the clouds... this wasn’t Earth, either, or any terrestrial planet he’d visited before.

Although, that didn’t explain... the fennec lifted his arm and looked. That first cable still snaked down from the port and into his bag, where he could still feel the weight of the containment unit. But the other one, the one that the AI had guided him to socket into the Vulpes’s access port, just kind of... hung down in the air, cleanly cut halfway along the cable’s length. Halsey’s projection still remained active, idling in the air by his shoulder with that little song.

So the fennec thought about it... “Halsey?”

A small vibration from the box in his bag. The projection swam around in the air, still rooted at his armband’s screen but apparently free within some small range of movement. “Yes?”

"What happened? Where are we?" Kobaj frowned. "Am I dead? Is this what being dead feels like?"

"Detour. Here. And - no, at least not in the clinical definition." The projection swam around in the air for a moment, always keeping close to Kobaj's body, and then came back towards his front. "While in transit I took the liberty to familiarize myself with this interface..."

Wait a second. "Interface?"

"Yes! Interface, configuration, and housing." Halsey's projection floated back down towards his arm, and hung there. It looked like it couldn't move further than a foot and a half or so from its source. "I am running out of my main containment unit - the box. You have me connected to your..." Here, that eye-light shortened down to a judgmental slit again. "...not entirely regulation, nor legal, armband system. I am operating *from* my containment unit, *through* your armband. Do you understand?"

"Um..."

"Like a computer, hooked up to a projector screen. I am still *there*, but you see me coming from *here*." Halsey nodded, or at least did a little motion that Kobaj interpreted as nodding. "Yes?"

"I... guess so. And did you-"

"Ah! Let me see... ah. Your system's battery is running at four hundred percent efficiency; I have overridden the integrated processor and substituted my own, which should give roughly an eighty thousand percent increase in speed; I've also rearranged some of the internal specifications so that now you can run multiple tasks alongside one another, and also with increased efficiency-"

Kobaj frowned. That was already a feature. "What do you mean, multiple tasks?"

"Not counting internal and system tasks, up to... eight thousand? I don't have benchmark statistics for this interface. When you had me plugged in, I noticed that it is very similar to standard Federation-issued armband-type computers, but with some staggering differences."

"Well, about that-"

"Also, I removed some... very obvious spyware subroutines that seemed to be intimately ingrained into your operating system."

"Wait!" Kobaj had to shout to get Halsey to stop babbling on. "You said *in transit*? I don't recognize where we are; how fast did we...?"

The eye-light blinked a few times, and then seemed to avoid eye contact with the fox, looking out beside him. "If you are relying on the standard definition of velocity, of change in position over a period of time... well, the limit approaches infinity."

That took Kobaj a minute. He looked around again.

"Wait. So it was - instant?"

"Essentially, yes."

"You - *teleported* us?"

"That is what that coded instruction section does, yes. I assumed you knew?"

"How? There's no way you-"

If that one light could display self-satisfaction... "With a lot of power. That is why I requested you plug me into the surroundings. It was... not entirely legal, but I had to borrow some power from the station. Vulpes? That is the name I got when plugged in. I am a higher designation than the security system on that station, so I could easily work my way in and... get a jump, so to say."

"Okay..." Kobaj had to take several seconds to breathe deeply and gain some semblance of his bearings. Kind of hard to navigate in a place he'd neither been to nor even seen before. "What are the downsides?" *Or in layman's terms: how screwed are we?*

"Downsides? For us, none. Other than how it might take a bit of work to find a similar power source around here..."

That didn't sound good. "Wait. How much power did that take?"

"The calculation actually approaches my inner computational limits. Sectors three through... seventeen of the Vulpes have had their reserve batteries entirely emptied."

The Vulpes only had eighteen sectors. Kobaj felt hardly more at ease out here than he had when he'd been cornered in the dark maintenance section with a set of rifles pointed right at him.

Halsey looked up towards the sky, at the tiny sun hardly larger than any other star in the night sky seen from the Herald's Reach, and the similarly blue-white sky and charcoal-grey clouds floating lazily by. "Federation designation Voigo VIII."

That was a relief, at least. The fennec fox breathed out a nervous sigh. "So we're still in Federation space."

“Technically so. The entire system has been marked as restricted space since its first discovery, however.”

Maybe if he started walking around, he could find someone to talk to, maybe get a ride off this place. Just because it was officially and legally restricted space, didn't mean that people didn't come here. The architecture out along the horizon was proof enough that someone at least *used* to live here. The fennec turned around a bit more, picked a direction, and started walking that way. “Why's that?”

“It is standard information provided in your-”

“Company handbook? Yeah, nobody reads that chapter. What's the point of memorizing all these restricted areas if we're never gonna go there?”

“Mmm.” The green-tinted projection hovered around to Kobaj's other shoulder. “Prior scans and spectroscopy of this system's star show that it is approaching the end of its life. OB-supergiant type, very massive, very unstable...”

“I slept through most of my classes, but doesn't that mean-”

“Supernova! Yes. Big and spectacular.”

Oh. The fennec picked up his pace, the consequences of that running through his thoughts. “When is this supposed to happen?”

Halsey looked up to the sun again, and hummed quietly in calculation. “...Lower boundary of the activity range passed six years ago.”

“What about the upper boundary?”

If Halsey's avatar, a simple outlined box with that one point of light for an eye, could show emotion... this might be the closest to a childish smile that Kobaj could expect from it. “Fourteen years! If not for certain annihilation, I would *love* to witness a supernova of this magnitude up close. Really, it could happen any time. Quite remarkable for the calculations to come down so precise, considering how long stars like this commonly last. It is like pinpointing the time of your death to within about five hours-”

“Okay. Okay. I get it.” Inhale, exhale. “Can you - teleport us back, or something? If this is restricted space, I don't imagine we can just go to the nearest port and wait for the next shuttle?”

“Yes.”

That lack of hesitation wiped away all of the worry that had been boiling in the pit of his stomach. The fennec rolled his head back and let out a ragged, relieved sigh-

“All I require is about fifteen thousand exajoules of energy, and the Federation spacetime coordinates to which you’d like me to take us...”

Kobaj stopped in his tracks again, hoping, *hoping* he’d misheard but knowing full well he hadn’t. There was no way. No way that he’d misheard, for one, and also no way that he’d be able to find that kind of power source *here*, of all places. Soft green grass beneath his feet, a cool breeze running its fingers through his fur. The ‘joules’ part he understood, but just how many joules Halsey had outlined was something else entirely.

So in an attempt to avoid arrest - *now I’m feeling like it probably would’ve been far easier to just go with them* - Kobaj had ended up teleporting himself, with the high-classification AI core for *his entire spaceship*, to a planet in *restricted space*. Restricted for a reason, most likely.

Something off in the distance caught his eye. He couldn’t say what it was, but the most noticeable structure sticking out from the nearby mountains like a dagger from the earth had... *changed*, somehow, and that gave him a bad feeling. Maybe he was just imagining things.

Hopefully.

He swallowed, trying to keep his voice level. “Halsey?”

The projection blinked. “Yes?”

“Is this planet inhabited?”

“My records say yes.”

“Federation?”

“No. No Federation habitation has been allowed since the system’s discovery.”

Hard to tell from here, but that structure... the more he looked at it, the more he felt that it was some kind of antenna. And if he knew anything about physics, which he liked to think he *did* after having to brush up on it more than once for some more technical repairs, suddenly blinking into existence out here probably sent out a kind of signal easily picked up by anything looking for it. Like a raindrop on the surface of a pond, sending out waves to the shore.

Except their sudden appearance here was more like a boulder instead, and the pond the fabric of space. That seemed like a good way to think about it.

“Ah.” He swallowed. “Something tells me they know we’re here, too. Do you think I can generate that kind of energy running as fast as I can in the opposite direction?”

“Kobaj, I think th-”

“Halsey. Stop. That was a joke.”

It really *would* have been better to have just stayed on the Vulpes and let the police take him. It had to have been something big that prompted the restriction of this system, and to have stopped the Federation from colonizing these planets. Of all the other systems he could remember in similar situations, most of them were due to hostile environments or lack of resources, and a select few because of equally hostile civilizations.

If that structure *was* an antenna, then - Kobaj knew that he’d soon find out.