

A sweet, gentle wind ran its fingers through the fennec's fur, as if urging him further towards the massive structure rising out of the nearby ridge. No matter how much he tried, he could not take his eyes off of it: the sleek black metal held together seemingly by pure natural order instead of any sort of connection, at least as far as he could tell from hear, and glowing faintly against the lavender-blue sky.

Or was it an audible hum? He couldn't tell, really. Mostly he was aware of the sharp gaze of the distant bluish sun through thin clouds overhead, tiny little pinpricks of the solar rays poking and digging at his skin through his fur, even though the air around him felt only comfortably warm. Still, though, it was a nice change from where he'd been half an hour earlier.

Yet again he went over the sequence in his head: just this morning he'd been working on rooting through his ship's control AI, tasked personally – *personally* – by his captain; the cheetah's slight yet confident smile, the imploring glimmer in his eyes, still held fresh in the fox's memory. Then the docking at the spaceport, and how he'd brought that AI off the ship to run it by his friend who just so happened to be running an operation on that spaceport, and it all seemed to be going well.

Then, of course, something changed, and next thing he knew he was being ushered down the back maintenance halls of the spaceport, the Intergalactic Alliance Police close on his tail for God knows what reason. They couldn't have *already* found out he'd brought the AI out of the ship, which admittedly *was* illegal, but... he'd only wanted to disable some of the automatic magnetic locking mechanisms on the doors in that section, so that he could slip away into the crowds and evade capture.

The strange damn code he'd discovered within the AI had done the first part of that. It did that for eighty-nine percent of the entire spaceport, if the power usage statistics were accurate, but instead of just opening some doors, it tossed the fennec halfway across the galaxy and dumped him here into Federation-restricted space.

He sighed, and wiped the back of his paw across his forehead. Felt like he should be sweating, though it certainly wasn't hot enough for that; the grass beneath his footpaws and tickling at his legs leaned and danced under that breeze, though when he reached down to graze his fingerpads across the blades they folded and cracked, dried relentlessly beneath an unforgiving sun.

An unforgiving supernova. A paw raised to his brow did little to shield his eyes from the glare of that tiny pinpoint up behind the clouds, wreathed in a sea of its own light amid the smooth color of the rest of the sky. To someone like him who spent most of his time in more habitable environments such as his quarters aboard the Herald's Reach, he wouldn't have had any idea that tiny, unimposing fleck up there was a nuclear megadetonation waiting to happen.

The fox focused his gaze forward at the antennae structure, coming steadily closer. No more than a quarter mile, probably. *Could* a supernova be classified as nuclear? He could probably ask Halsey that, but-

"You know," the AI chimed, close to his ear. He turned his head that way, saw nothing, then turned it the other way and startled back with the closeness of the hazy green projection, like a uniform box bearing an eye on one side. "This planet's atmosphere is well within Federation guidelines for habitability. Slightly elevated nitrogen levels, slightly depleted oxygen... mostly heavier isotopes of oxygen."

“What does that mean?”

The eye shortened into a slit, as if in thought. “You may have a harder time breathing and find yourself more easily winded, but no lasting side-effects.”

“So...”

“Ah! And there is an interesting prominence of argon. Still trace, still acceptable, but interesting.”

But if he *were* to ask the little ship-core AI about it, running out of the box-shaped containment unit clutched under his arm, he might not hear the end of it. At least he could be thankful for the companionship; Halsey had said that recent records of the planet showed it *was* still inhabited, though no sign of that fact had come across to the fennec in the half-hour he’d been walking. Even now as the antenna started to look towards him across the next hill he could tell that it hadn’t been deployed in quite a while, with splashes of red-orange rust marring that black metal, and the folded arms of the thing – solar panels, it looked like – loose in places and entirely shattered in others.

“Halsey.”

“Kobaj?”

The fennec glanced down before taking his first stride up the hill. Shallow incline, but still; just because he hadn’t encountered any snakes in the grass, or snake-like *beings*, didn’t mean they weren’t there. “Can you get me some info on that... structure up there, now that we’re closer?”

“Mmm...”

He *did* enjoy that little musical chime the AI put out when it thought about something. Halsey’s projection floated back around towards his other shoulder, the base of the hologram rooted in the screen of Kobaj’s armband computer. *Eighty thousand percent computational efficiency*, Halsey had stated after the transport... probably just his imagination, but Kobaj thought he could feel a faint tingling in the fur of his wrist whenever the AI had to process something.

“It is indeed a transmitter antenna. Basic scans show that it might have been used as a sort of particle beam, similar to a radio antenna but for transmitting pure mass-energy instead of encoded data.”

Kobaj stopped in his tracks. “So we can’t use it to – communicate?” Halsey had been right, as usual: hardly twenty steps up and already he could feel the sting in his legs.

“Oh, it has communication capabilities as well. My first assumption is that it is powered by on-site solar-charged battery, but...” Halsey looked down towards the ground, glowed a little bit, then gradually angled up along the horizon. “It appears to have a subterranean connection. Three of them, offset sixty degrees.” It looked back towards the fennec. “Geometry like this implies it is one in a sixfold array.”

The fennec rolled his eyes and took a deep breath of the sweet air. Again, pleasantly warm, like a spring morning back on his home planet... except for how the air scratched and grated at the back of his throat, as though it were a desert breeze. “You’re not telling me I’ll have to get all of them running to send a distress signal?”

“That is improbable. To tell for certain, though, I will have to look at the configuration of the systems... can you plug me in?”

“Just... give me a moment...” the fennec panted once he got there, taking a moment to brace his paws against his knees and rest. The thinner atmosphere definitely had its effects on him here; he also took the moment to search through the bag he carried with him, hoping that the cable that had gotten sliced straight through during the teleport wasn’t the only one he had with him. The massive shadow of the structure, pale violet, thrown by the thing did little to shield from the sun once he started to make his way around. “You said you had no info on the races inhabiting this planet?”

Another little hum. Kobaj ran his fingers across the smooth surface of the antenna’s base while Halsey thought about it, fingerpads grazing over the little patches of rust. “No. But this *is* Federation space, so it should not be surprising to find-”

“Found it. Let me just...” Luckily he still had the cable from when he’d... *borrowed* the spaceport’s power. Fourteen sector batteries worth. It took a little bit of jiggling to fit the other end into the port hidden into a lidded box on the far side of the antenna, above a platform slightly raised out of the earth with tall grass and weeds trying to reclaim the metal for the earth. After a moment, it socketed in with a heavy *clunk*. “There. What’ve you got?”

It took a moment for him to realize both Halsey’s projection and the screen of his armband went dark. No response to him tapping the screen or hitting the button... but right before his heart dropped into his stomach, the antenna clunked again, shuddered, shifted, and started to grate loudly as the arms high up moved and repositioned, and gradually spread out into the shape of the dish. The fennec took a step back, careful to maintain his connection to the base, and shielded his eyes with his other paw: it definitely looked like it hadn’t been used in years. Decades, maybe.

Then, a burst of static from the panel, followed by a grating whine... and then Halsey’s voice, grainy and faint from a speaker that Kobaj hadn’t realized was there: “...in quite a while... hardly enough reserve power to deploy. Must wait to collect power for anything big, but you *should* be able to send a simple distress signal...” With that, the screen of his armband flickered back to life. A brief yet strong gust of wind pushed against his back and forced him to lean forward; he lowered himself down as he tapped at the screen, bringing up the interface for the signal.

His tail spread out across the metal behind him, and he spent one more minute looking over what he’d typed. If he was going to do anything by Federation standards, it would be *this* – he didn’t want to risk spending the rest of his life out here on this remote planet in restricted space. Although, looking at that sun, that might not be too much longer. The antenna hummed quietly, gentle vibrations echoing out through the platform beneath him. From here it would be a matter of waiting.

Some of that humming overlapped with Halsey’s own as the AI poked through the apparently-ancient technology, its musical voice crackling back through the speaker every now and then. Again, Kobaj appreciated the companionship, and it brought him some measure of comfort to hear that at least Halsey enjoyed the predicament. It sounded almost like this old “mass-energy transmitter array”, as it was apparently called, was a candy store for the AI where all the shelves were marked eighty percent off.

“...Indeed sixfold,” the AI went on. Kobaj tilted his head back: the dish had been drawing itself around in slow circles for a few minutes, though finally settled on a configuration pointing it directly at the pinpoint sun. “All connected to each other and a central station. For focusing and magnifying the beam; it is a standard configuration for systems like this, and-”

Kobaj jumped nearly to his feet with a new voice, sharp and clear from a short distance behind him: “Stand up, and disconnect your device. You are in restricted Federation space.”

That couldn't be right. That *couldn't* be right. Somewhere *this* remote, orbiting a sun well into the range for its supernova... slowly he lifted himself back to his feet, paws at his sides with the data cable still connecting him to the antenna. Sure enough, though, when he turned there stood a falcon in official high-rank Federation uniform, arms crossed in front of her chest – and with a squad of armed soldiers behind her. Not the same as those he'd run from aboard the spaceport; these were combat-issue rifles pointed at him. Halsey kept silent.

The falcon looked him up and down, then up again. She had to, standing about half a head shorter than the fennec. “Fleet Admiral Aubrey. Stationed beyond the immediate danger radius of the Voigo system, to ensure that nobody enters this restricted space... and yet, here you are, suddenly blipping into existence on the surface of the planet.” She squinted, sharp eyes following Kobaj's arms as he braced his paws against his lower back; he could *still* feel the effects of the lowered oxygen. “With an energy burst powerful enough to render on our scans as a weapon detonation. You'll understand if I request you come with us?”

“Yeah, I'm-” *-terrified, actually*. He swallowed, moving his paws further back; after some blind feeling, his fingers found the screen of his armband. “-very glad you're here, actually; I just sent a distress signal, since... as you can imagine, I didn't *mean* to come here, and I-”

“We will speak later. We are in danger just *waiting* here on this planet.” Fleet Admiral Aubrey waved a hand at him. “Disconnect your device and come easily. You have already broken at least four laws; do not force me to increase that count.”

He hoped so deeply that he knew his armband well enough to correctly do what he intended. A few more taps, a silent wish that Halsey would remain quiet... and then he made a show of bringing his armband in front of him again, fiddling with the cable until it came free. The screen dimmed, blinked on, turned off again; nestled in his bag where he'd slid it after his rest, the AI's containment unit continued vibrating for a handful of seconds longer before it fizzed to a silent stop. No projection emanated from his screen. The fennec breathed out a low sigh.

“Look,” he began, and then stumbled when one of the soldiers forcibly turned him around to cuff him. They could at least let him keep the cable, hanging loosely from the antenna's panel. “I'm just a Federation repairman. I didn't mean any-”

A thwack to his shoulder with the butt of that rifle shut his mouth better than the falcon's words had. The group led him down the hill in the opposite direction from where he'd come, bringing a small carrier into view settled into the valley below – standard model, used for transporting cargo, living or otherwise, from a planet surface to an orbital craft. The impact of that breaching atmosphere must have been the sudden gust of wind he'd felt earlier.

He'd repaired one of these before, and as such looked around at the interior once they ushered him in. Aubrey looked him over one more time before disappearing into the front, and a few moments later, the heavy grab and pull of ascent settled the fennec firmly in his seat, paws still bound behind his back. Naturally the craft had no windows, and as expected, the trip to the main ship took a few minutes: even with the boosted accelerators on this model, it would still take time to travel beyond a supernova's blast radius. Once there and docked, given by the steady *thumps* that echoed out through the hull, the soldiers all rose to their feet and waited for the fleet admiral to stride back through, her presence more imposing than her body, and from there led Kobaj onto the ship.

At once he recognized the architecture of the interior. This was a RIM mark IV carrier-class, essentially Federation standard for "defensible space station". A base for long missions usually in a certain area, with the capability to move if needed. Perfect for a research vessel sent to watch over the end of a solar system. Kobaj tried to peek around the guards' shoulders at the various improvements and interior workings of the access panels and systems, though they ushered him fairly quickly down into the prison halls of the ship.

Aubrey braced her hands against her hips after watching the guards toss him into the room, sharp eyes watching him and issuing silent warning not to do anything else stupid. After a moment of glaring, she raised one hand up and out towards him, fingers splayed. Kobaj looked at it, tilted his head, looked at her.

"Your card. Federation ID. I need to report to your overseeing officer."

"Oh." That made sense. At least he'd been allowed to keep his bag: he set it onto the floor and rummaged through it, careful to keep Halsey's containment unit out of sight. Not that it would matter right now, the fennec thought: without the glowing and humming, it could doubtless pass for some sort of puzzle box from elsewhere in the galaxy. His heart skipped a bit – it'd been doing that a lot this past hour or so – as he started to bring the card out, realizing that he hadn't been in in a while and that it probably wouldn't be good to pass of an expired ID to a fleet admiral. No worries there, though, he found after a second, and held it out. Carefully filed talons took it from him. "When will you have that back to me?"

"Within a half-hour." Aubrey swung the door, a single solid slab of metal save for the small barred window, shut behind her. Then she turned to stride off, but stopped herself and looked over her shoulder. "Unless something comes up. Which it shouldn't, should it?"

He swallowed. "No ma'am."

No response. Those eyes held his gaze for a second longer before she fully turned and headed off down the hall. Kobaj remained leaning against the door trying to peer down the halls with his nose sticking through the spaces between bars and fingers pressed against the surface... and then, certain that she'd turned the corner and nobody else was watching, the fox slid his bag towards the wall with a foot and crouched down to find the panel set into the wall.

Again, he'd repaired this type of ship before. The prison doors worked by simple double-deadbolt pressure lock system, kept in place so long as the external valve remained tightly shut. After some searching against the base of that far wall, his claws slid beneath the plate metal covering the recessed panel; with a slight tug it came free, and the fox wiggled his fingers as he looked through what he had to

play with. Good thing for him, bad thing for security that the energized state of the lock was with the valve sealed, meaning that if the power which routed through this box over here ended up cut off...

All he had with him in his bag other than Halsey's box was a spare coat in case he got cold while on the spaceport, a myriad jumble of cables that wouldn't be helpful here, a screwdriver that fit nothing in this box, an almost-empty... fully-empty bag of his favorite candy. This would take a bit longer than last time, with only his paws to help him. Pushing that last half-handful of candy into the other side of his mouth, the fox settled down and leaned in close to work at the wires and systems, every now and then flicking an ear over towards the door for the sound of a forced opening.

And it took a while. It certainly *was* more difficult without the precision tools, and he ended up shocking himself three times on the way towards that half-hour mark that he tried to keep track of with his armband's screen, still devoid of the AI's presence. Too much longer, and he might have to shove the lid back into place and then sit himself down against the other wall waiting for Aubrey to return. She looked as though she were equally capable of and likely to peel him apart with those talons of hers.

Right before Kobaj decided to give in, though, his ears both flicked back in response to the *hsss-clunk* from the edge of the door. Tail threatening to wag behind him, he turned... and felt the joy spread to his muzzle once the shadow of the door gave way to a sliver of light from the hall outside, which steadily widened into a bar. Quickly he set the lid back in place, tossed his bag over his shoulder, and peeked out into the hall.

A ship of this size carried a combined crew and personnel load ten thousand strong, and yet they had not a single guard able to keep watch over the hall. Then again, Kobaj figured as he started his way down the corridor, at a post like this they probably hadn't expected to have to apprehend a prisoner. This planet, this *system*, would definitely be something for him to put a little more research into once he got back home. Which... he glanced down at the local time listed on his armband again, other paw tracing against the cool metal of the walls as he went. Which should be about twenty minutes total: fifteen to find where he was going on this ship and then another five between the surface of the planet and then back aboard his Herald's Reach.

Assuming Halsey had told the truth, to the best of its abilities, in that teleportation being instant. Kobaj was an engineer and repairman, not a physicist; he didn't need to worry about that sort of thing. Actually, what he *did* need to worry about right now was getting caught and tossed right back into that cell, which very well might be the next thing to happen to him with another armed guard strolling down from the other end of the hallway. A Samoyed, snow fur trimmed close to her body without losing any of its characteristic fluff, and eyes that looked almost violet in the artificial light of the ship.

Eyes that scanned the fennec from head to toe and back to head, then resumed straight forward. Kobaj let his breath out once she'd passed by, silently thanking the Federation for making a single uniform standard across all quadrants of the galaxy. Still, though, he kept his pace brisk as he made his way around and through the twisting halls and junction corridors, every now and then stopping to take a small glance at the sector maps displayed in intersections: an engineer who'd been posted on this ship for the past however long it had been here wouldn't have to look at a map to make his way around, would he?

It took about ten minutes of walking and guessing for the fennec to make his way to the technical storage, about on par with his time estimate earlier. No telling if Aubrey would decide to go on a stroll

and visit the prisoner, though, so he wasted no time in sidling up to the door and peering through the thick glass window, ensuring this was where he wanted to be. Satisfied, he reached for the handle... and then stopped after trying to give it a jiggle, coming to the admittedly-obvious realization that it was locked.

And he didn't have his ID card on him. The fox gritted his teeth, rolled his eyes, leaned his head back and looked up towards the ceiling... and then leaned forward again, heartbeat picking up again. He recognized this keypad system: his most common assignment back aboard the Herald's Reach other than standard routine system diagnostics and things like circuitry repairs was helping new ensigns and temporary workers get back into their quarters after forgetting their code, or leaving their ID inside, or anything along those lines.

Another careful look down one direction of the hallway, then down the other... most ships had no reason to change their basic security codes, though Kobaj *had* encountered a few. He tried not to think of what he'd have to do if Fleet Admiral Goddamn Aubrey turned out to be one of the ones who enforced that, while he tapped in the code for a verified entry... followed by his thirteen-digit ID number... followed by the steady yellow blinking of the keypad's alert light, one second, two second, three seconds. He swallowed-

-and in doing so, would have missed the *click* of the lock opening if that light hadn't flicked to smooth green. Again he let out a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding, and slid into the storage room. This particular one held the technological backups mainly for the ship's native systems: the fire suppression, the door locks, shelf upon shelf of electrical implement and doodad, spare drives and screen panels for the various computer systems around. And there, nestled into a corner, a black polyplastic dual-latched box, otherwise unlocked. Kobaj went right on over to that, dropping to his knees to flick it open.

Inside sat a set of four clean AI containment units, each one identical to themselves and yet very slightly different from the one in his bag. That was something he hadn't noticed until now; he reached forward, grazed his fingerpads over the surface of one, then closed around it and lifted it up. Heavier than Halsey's, less embellished. Obviously standard, now that he looked at it. It had just been so long since he'd earned the clearance to operate on a shipwide AI system that he must have forgotten what an *actual* Federation standard system for one looked like. And, to be fair, it *was* his first time handling one with his own paws.

There was something going on. His ship captain personally requesting that he come to his quarters – not the *bridge*, but the captain's own personal quarters – to task him with fixing this nonstandard AI unit, and what does Kobaj find inside but the very block of code that landed him *here*, of all place... pseudowarp- and hyper-drives had been standard on the highest classes of cruisers for the past two and a half centuries now, but true *teleportation* yet evaded understanding. And then the one thing capable of pulling it off just happened to fall into Kobaj's paws.

*Definitely* something going on. He slid the new containment unit into his bag across from Halsey's, careful not to get the two mixed up, and then was just as quickly on his way as when Aubrey had left him in the cell. He knew where to go from here: the last time he'd been on a ship of this class had ended in him going to the same place, though that time *hadn't* been of his own decision. From the technical storage, the escape pod bay lay only two decks down. Another five minutes, maybe.

Another armed soldier on the way there, and then a fellow engineer a little later. That one was a short, slim weasel, someone who eyed him and frowned as if he didn't recognize him – and that frown turned into a confused scowl once Kobaj gave his best pleasant smile and nodded, as if he *did* recognize *him*. His heart thumped in his chest, and for a moment he thought about stopping by a vending machine to get a good drink of water to calm his nerves.

No time, though. Never enough time. He tried not to check his armband whenever he passed a worker or a guard, thinking that that would make him seem undeniably suspicious, but when his clock ticked to three minutes after leaving the storage, he started to get nervous. Maybe he could find another map, but then there was no telling how long it would take to get to the escape pods. Up to this point everything had just gone so well, almost suspiciously so. Generally he tried not to leave things to fate and chance, but sure enough when he turned that next corner, the hallway broadened into this level's pod bay, doors sealed and room entirely empty.

This part was new to him. Clutching his bag to his side, the fox jogged over to the far wall near the main control panel for the section – intercom and PA, lights control, door subsystems, everything else for manual overrides. After opening the thing, he cursed under his breath for not thinking of swiping a small set of electrician's tools from the storage room that he'd literally *just* been in. That was what happened to a nervous mind, though; even now claws caught and stuck in the spaces between the panel and the wall when he pried it open, his fingers fumbled with the wires and the switches, his ears kept on flicking around as though he could hear footsteps coming up behind him. This box here was only a minor interface instead of the power main for the sector, so if he caused a short *here*, it should only knock out the bay and maybe the adjacent hallways instead of causing a cascade like what had happened on the spaceport... hopefully. Also, it hopefully wouldn't try to send the electricity *through* the fox handling the finger-thick cables. Hopefully. He sucked in a slow breath, gritted his teeth, closed his eyes... and jerked one of his paws.

When he opened his eyes, the entire bay was dark. That meant it worked. Quickly, carefully, he left the panel door where it lay against the wall and ran over towards the first pod in line, tapping over the freestanding control panel. Many large-scale accidents and events in the past had changed these ships so that their escape pod bay and systems were entirely self-powered, meaning that personnel and crew could board and escape in the event of total power outage, or even a massive hull breach: as long as they could get to the pods, they could get out.

The doors pulled open with a *pop* and *hiss*, and with a glance behind him – as soon as he'd knocked out the power, voices had started shouting in the halls; he thought he could hear a far-off alarm siren from one of the nearby sectors – he tossed first his bag into the compartment and then drew himself in after. Twelve-person pod with a built-in autopilot system, but... Kobaj had somewhere he needed to go. He had to retrieve something he'd left behind. A few taps to the screen in the cockpit woke it up, then a few more turned on the emergency lights inside the pod; he threw a small switch on the back wall and watched as the doors closed and sealed behind him, blocking out the view of the dark bay. Maybe he'd send Aubrey an apology from the spaceport once he got back.

Slow, quiet rumbling of the pod coming to power beneath his feet, waking up beneath his inputs and commands. Built-in autopilot meant that the system was thankfully quite user-friendly to the untrained; just as he was not a physicist, Kobaj had never learned a scrap of how to pilot a craft. The blast shielding over the pod's front port remained drawn, with the retractor gears only barely starting to turn once he pressed the ignition button and verified the request on the screen.

Then – growl, grind, heavy *thump* and the sound of folding metal with the pod slamming into the breakaway doors of its compartment, and *then* the shielding drew back. An outage in the escape pod bay would prevent a disembark from registering in the ship's main systems at least until power came back on, which would hopefully – there was that word again – give him time to get close to the planet's atmosphere before a pursuit would be sent.

The distance here was... quite far for an escape pod to traverse, so there would *also* be the chance that the ship's security systems would detect it, and he'd get scooped back up before being able to get much of anywhere. Or the chance that Aubrey or one of the guards went by his cell, found him missing, and immediately sent out a team to search. Or maybe the distance would turn out to be *too* far, and he'd have to rely on gravity and a dead navigation system to make his way back down to the planet... once satisfied that the system had the right track for now, Kobaj breathed out a not-quite-relaxed sigh and headed in back to look through his bag.

Everything was still there. Everything he needed, at least, which consisted of Halsey's non-standard containment unit, and then the Federation AI box he'd pulled from the storage. The pod rumbled and bounced around him, joggled by small bits of space debris or adjusting its trajectory. Again and again the fennec wandered to the front to peer out the window – he'd seen space before, but even so, another look at the wide empty expanse gave him pause – and then into the back to make sure that his things hadn't suddenly and suspiciously teleported out of his bag like a fox from a spaceport.

Five minutes. Slow-going; he could still very clearly make out the shape of the carrier ship through the tiny rear ports of the pod. Ten minutes. Still nothing to show that he'd yet been followed, no streaks of light between the stars, no small puffs of ignition lights out of the sides of the retreating ship. Fifteen, twenty... he'd sat himself down on one of the seats in the back, paws on his knees, looking straight forward at the paneling along the opposite wall. Not the most comfortable chair he'd felt, but still, it was better than nothing. Much nicer than the seats along the five or so pods for the Herald's Reach, which paled like a gecko before a feral wolf when compared against Aubrey's ship. Why *did* this system need so many personnel watching over it?

A forceful thump jerked him upright, and from there to his feet to peer out the back ports again. Still nothing coming; the fox strode over to the cockpit, leaned in over the panel, peered through the window... and started to see the outline of a rounded hexagon down on the planet's surface, slowly approaching. Not much longer, now. Good thing Halsey had been right about that array thing. One fingerpad against the screen drawing out the new course of entry, he just needed to figure out which corner he'd been captured at: he would have liked to think that it would be the only one with its dish extended and solar panels collecting, but once the planet's atmosphere started to shake the pod and threaten to skew the trajectory, he quickly came to realize that that was not the case.

And at this point, he had no time to reconsider or change the course any further. The alert lights inside the pod flicked on, and from there they pulsed in and out, in and out. The fennec sat down, then perked his ears, ran into the back to grab his bag, and sat right back down again, strapping himself in and clutching it tightly in his lap; he closed his eyes, held onto that bag as if it were the one thing that would keep him sitting in the event that the landing went wrong.

It was an escape pod. Naturally that 'landing' part wasn't the most comfortable he'd felt. The thing must have touched down on the downside of a hill, too, since he could feel the craft skid and bounce, then

impact again, and again, and again, each time making him feel as though his teeth would fly out of his mouth were he not gritting them together... and then a long, low rumble trying to toss him to the side, and then nothing. A moment later, and the pleasant little *dinging* of the pod alert system began. Successful landing.

No time to waste, either. The fox rose to his feet, wobbled a bit, ran back to the front to open the rear doors, and practically leapt out into the tall grass and relentless sun. That landing indeed put him at the bottom of a valley, which meant he'd have to put in the energy to climb all the way back up the hill... and once he got there, panting and with his legs burning all over again, he saw that the autopilot put him fairly close to the antennae. But if it was the right one or not...

After spending only a few minutes catching his breath he started his way over, constantly looking over his shoulder and shielding his eyes from the distant sun in the sky, looking as though it remained in the same place despite the hour or so that had passed. He couldn't help but pick up his pace as it came closer, rising up above and before him, a black metal monolith stretching its arms out to take advantage of that unforgiving sun. He could hear the thing humming before he came close enough to see the control panel, sitting up on the slightly-raised platform... and then the fennec breathed out a heavy sigh of relief when he caught sight of the cable hanging loose from the port, right where he'd left it.

At first he struggled with getting it plugged back into his armband, paws shaking and fingers somewhat numb with all of the action packed into this day. His screen darkened, there was that little zap along his wrist again, he poked at the screen and the buttons... "Halsey? Halsey, are you there?"

Silence, other than the low, steady humming. He *hoped* this worked. Then:

"Ah! Kobaj!" That small projection pulled itself from the screen of his armband, though the AI's voice continued to crackle through the old speaker on the panel. "It is good to see you are still here. I tried to reason with that woman, but--"

"I put a mute command on you. I know. I'm sorry." The fennec flicked through the diagnostic screens of the system as he spoke, trying his best to squeeze what little time he had together. Different internal architecture than just about all of the tech he'd worked with, but then again, most of his experience lay in Federation pieces, or at least systems based on the native foundation. These antennae... the structure was *there*, sort of, but it wasn't clear. He could at least see the battery percentages, spread across... "Oh! Good! You did what I asked you to, I see."

"I did. Four of the systems are up and running, and I am working on establishing connection with a fifth. The sixth is unfortunately broken, and will require manual repair. There *is* a center pylon, which--"

"Can you execute the code again?"

Halsey's avatar looked back from the antenna to Kobaj, and then blinked. "The code?"

"Yes. The teleportation. You have the coordinates for the reception bay of the Herald's Reach, right?" His own quarters would be much too small a space for the margin of error inherent in any spacetime calculation correction

“Well... we are too far from established Federation space to make a connection at this range – I have been trying since you first got arrested...”

“I didn’t get *arrested*.” He did, but that wasn’t the point. “Oh. By the way. Why didn’t you warn me they were there?”

“I didn’t notice.”

“You didn’t notice?”

“Yes.” The avatar nodded. “Same reason you didn’t. Their craft was cloaked.”

Cloaked. Odd. Kobaj shook his head. “Look, can you execute the teleport or not?”

A little bit more crackling issued from the speaker, and then, Halsey shifted itself entirely to the fox’s armband. “I can. It is dangerous, though: if the ship embarked since we left, then we will be-”

“It won’t. Can you start preparing?”

“Well, why not? There is nothing-” It fell silent, then blinked, then looked up at Kobaj again. “I am the ship AI. That is why.”

Kobaj looked up to the sky. He thought – *thought* – he could see a parting in the clouds, as if something just entered from outside the atmosphere. “There’s enough energy?”

“Ah... yes. Barely. I have been using the solar array to gather power and store it in the station’s reserves, but I *can* pull from it. I would very much like to return here in the future and study this array...”

“We need to go. Do it.” He closed his eyes, gripped the strap of his bag with one paw, realized at the last moment that he’d lose *another* cable here, and-

-there was that sudden, intense pressure on every inch of his body again, and the dizzying swirling and spinning. And then there was nothing under his feet, and he was floating... in the main bay of the Herald’s Reach, he found, when he opened his eyes. Again, he let out a relieved sigh. So far from Aubrey now that she might as well not exist, and if Halsey couldn’t establish a connection with any other Federation craft, then *they* likely couldn’t either. He would be safe here.

The fox tugged the data cable, split cleanly in half along its length, out of his armband and spent a moment to find his orientation here in the bay. He passed two other workers on his way out, who were very clearly trying not to stare at him; hopefully that wouldn’t come up later. Still, though, his heart beat in his chest on his way down the hall, the microgravity of the small craft forcing him to push off from the floor every now and then – he had so much to settle, but he probably wouldn’t be able to get back into contact with Serathano until the commotion on the spaceport died down. Hell, he didn’t think he’d want to risk checking to see what havoc he’d caused down there with his little escape.

Worries for another time. He had yet another spare data cable in his quarters: he’d done his job and “repaired” Halsey, but it wasn’t quite time to return it yet.

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All in all, though, things went... *well*. Within the hour he'd had the AI back in the captain's hands, with the cheetah keeping his paws around Kobaj's for a moment longer as he thanked the fennec; before sending him off he mentioned the commotion down on the spaceport, with a slight glimmer in his eyes. Maybe amusement, maybe concern, maybe something else. Hard to tell. Still a little nervous that he wasn't *totally* out of the spotlight, Kobaj made his way back to his quarters and waited there, working on other projects of his own until the Herald's Reach undocked and headed on its way.

Then, somewhat cramped in the restrictive space of his quarters, Kobaj locked his door behind him and slid the window panel shut. He plugged his armband into his diagnostics screen hanging near his bed, and from there, he slid a paw under the pillow... and held the little AI containment box off to the side, waiting for it to balance in the gravity. It hummed quietly once he plugged that in, too.

A moment later, the screen overhead blinked to life, and glowed. Halsey's voice came through over it: "You know, you never answered if you have the clearance to do this..."

"I've already done it. Besides, there was the whole Vulpes fiasco... what's a little bit more bending of the law?" It had taken about an hour and a half to copy over all of the AI's code, and for a little while, Kobaj wasn't sure that the Federation standard unit he'd stolen had the capabilities to hold everything. To his relief it all worked, though, and now the box glowed faintly, pulsing with the same energy that he'd noticed down on the planet. Hopefully – there was that word yet again – the captain wouldn't realize the lack of that glow.

"This is *quite* dangerous, you know, Kobaj. I am still technically a ship-level AI system, and if anyone else notices you're still working on one..."

"You're not registered with the Herald's Reach. Different containment. You'll show up as a standard module."

"That is all very well, but..."

"It'll be fine. Can you get into contact with Serathano? I won't believe that he let himself get arrested until I see it."

Kobaj wasn't done. Nowhere near it.