Don and Storm waited on the other side of the cabins waiting to see if they could spot the two coming out of them, finding a place near the training grounds where they probably wouldn’t be disturbed and had a better vantage point of the land. The two had been waiting for a while now though, Storm using the knife he had found to whittle something from a stick he had also found while Don just watched while sitting under the tree that gave them shade. “Are we sure this is the best way to tactically go at this problem?” Storm asked as he sighed and put the knife away. “I know we can’t just search for them in the entire campground but we know at least two places where they’ll probably show up, and at the very least we can look for them there without looking so suspicious instead of skulking around the cabin area.”

“I was kind of hoping that we would catch them early in the morning as they walked out,” Don stated. “It could be possible that they didn’t even go to their cabin, they might have worked all night with the next firing of Veilfire happening. Let’s check in with the others and see what they have to say, especially since it’s almost noon already.”

When they telepathically talked with the others they found one another in agreement, and after a little discussion Don and Storm decided it would be best if they went up to the lodge where Veilfire was while they went to the mess hall to see if they could catch them while they were eating. Once their plans had been confirmed the two stood up, Storm sticking his sharpened stick in the ground before moving over to the lodge area. Not only did they have better knowledge of the potential security protocol that was there but they couldn’t risk being seen by any of their former fellow soldiers and getting identified.

The two quickly and quietly made their way up to the lodge, eventually grabbing a pair of random crates they found near the firing range in order to make it look like they were being productive. Luckily when they got to the lodge itself it appeared they didn’t have any fencing or guards to block it off as they continued to wander up. With a project as secret as this they were going to do everything they could to keep it obfuscated and fences and guards just highlighted that there was something potentially good in there to steal. What they did find when they got to the porch and examined the door was that the security on the door more than made up for it.

“A biometric reader and a voice analyzer,” Don said as Storm carefully knocked on the wooden door.

“This is actually a reinforced steel door too,” Storm replied as he rubbed his hand along the grain. “They did a really good job making it look like some old wooden one, probably reinforced the frame too and have vibration sensors on the walls and windows. If this isn’t where they’re holding Veilfire I would be hard-pressed to think of something else they would give this much security too.”

“Cheers for them,” the badger-wolf said as he continued to look around the frame of the door. “Question is, how are we going to get into someplace with all this security?”

“Exploit the weakest point of course,” the dragon replied with a wink as he knocked on the door. “The metahuman element.” Don called out Stormflare and Takum that they needed to come out for an emergency briefing, the two creatures waiting at the ready for the door to open… except as the minutes passed no one came to it. “Huh… they must be out.”

“Well if this is Veilfire then we may as well wait here,” Storm replied. “They got to come back sometime…”

That sometime turned out to be a few minutes later, Takum whistling to himself as he went up to the lodge to continue the prepping for Veilfire while Stormflare went and got food for them. While the grey fox was tired from spending most of the night trading back and forth with his partner on getting both the analytics set up for real-time comparison of the second fire as well as making sure that the charging process remained smooth he remained upbeat. After one or two more test fires they would show a few people on base how to do it and then they could go back to central control and just work on Veilfire from the luxury of their own workspace. All he had to do was remain conscious for the next twelve hours as he took the can of energy drink he had grabbed from the commissary and chucked it down while getting his thumb scanned.

Once that and a hastily given voice password was given he heard the security locks on the door disengage and he grabbed the handle to open it, only to stop as he stepped inside when he heard someone clearing their throat behind him. As he turned around he was caught off-guard as two guys in military uniforms hooked their arms under one of his and lifted him off the ground, bringing him inside before closing the door shut behind them and re-engaging the security system. “Hey, what do you think you’re doing?” Takum attempted to shout as the one that looked like a mix of a badger and wolf immediately brought him to a nearby chair and plopped him down into it. “Do you realize where you’ve just pushed yourself into?!”

“Yeah, the remote-control center for the Veilfire plasma satellite program,” Don replied matter-of-factly, causing the indignant look of the fox turn to one of confusion and slight fear as the dragon leaned in to look him eye to eye. “Now I need you to really help us out here, but if you start screaming or shouting for security I’m going to have to gag you and unfortunately all I got to do that is your own socks or underwear. We’re not here to hurt you, so are you going to play nice or do I have to take off your pants?”

Storm couldn’t help but smirk as the fox quickly said that he would play nice, the badger-wolf saying that if that was the case he wouldn’t have to tie him down either as he wiggled the roll of duct tape he had found in one of the crates that they had snatched. As they explained the situation to him they got word from the other group that they found Solarflare and was moving to intercept him as well, which meant that they didn’t have to worry about being disturbed for at least the moment. They quickly explained everything while they hovered over him, Don doing most of the talking while Storm took a look around the room.

The lodge had definitely received a retrofit, the hybrid thought to himself as he looked around and saw all the rebar that was strapped to the walls. Computer equipment was everywhere and most of it was hooked up to the console that Takum and Don were having their conversation at. Even if the security and Takum being there weren’t dead giveaways he saw that many of the pieces had the words Veilfire Project stamped on them along with the serial number of the project itself. He made sure to memorize it in his head before going back to the two just as the dragon was wrapping up his explanation.

“So you’re saying that because of Veilfire your group of… what were they called again?” Takum asked.

“Just… call us Gaia creatures for now,” Don said.

“Right, you guys are attempting to stop the war between the Bal’Kar, which are giant alien squid monsters, and the military from essentially destroying the planet,” Takum stated. “What I don’t get is why not just let us use Veilfire in order to clean out the Bal’Kar and then we don’t have to worry about it anymore? I know it’s a bit of a terrifying thing to behold but it’s super effective at what it does, more then you guys just wandering around trying to turn them into versions of your… Gaia selves.”

“Do you honestly think that the military is just going to stop at the Bal’Kar with this thing?” Storm said. “Dr. Sarkov may have built it for the Bal’Kar but once they wipe all of them out they’re not just going to let it sit idly in the sky because there are no more threats. I don’t know what you and your friend Solarflare thought was going to happen but once they’re able to operate the device on their own you’re going to get cut out of the project so fast you’re head’s going to spin.”

“Do you really want to be responsible for the deaths of thousands, maybe even tens of thousands, just because you think this is the easy way to solve the Bal’Kar problem?” Don asked as he spun the chair back his way to face him. “Because the second that they use this thing on a populated area, which I guarantee you they will, I’m going to make sure everyone knows that it was you and your partner that had a chance to stop it and failed.”

The grey fox looked between the two, both Gaia creatures leaning in to try and emphasize their point as Takum shrank slightly away from them before sighing. “Well… I guess when you put it that way,” the vulpine said as he slid his goggles over his eyes and began to type of the keyboard. “You know that as soon as they find out it was me, and they’re going to find out, they’re going to string me up for this, right?”

“Actually…” Don said with a grin. “We may have found someone that you can pin the fault on. I’m not sure if you can see but right now you have a very angry hacker probably attempting to bypass your security as we speak to get access to Veilfire’s systems.”

“A hacker?” Takum repeated as he opened a new window and began to type into the prompt. “There’s no way that some hacker can tap into a secure server like this and-“ suddenly a wall of text scrolled down the black background of the screen and the fox looked at it in slight shock. “Huh, I guess you were right.”

“Exactly,” Don stated. “So just let him into your systems and wreck up the place and you should be good to go.”

Takum sighed and shook his head, turning back around and leaning in his chair. “It’s not going to be that simple to take down Veilfire,” the fox explained as he gestured to the equipment around them. “Everything here is set up for the purpose of this being a black box site, which means the only connections these things have is with the satellite itself. Even if he was somehow able to patch into the signal leading up to the satellite itself the force flow of data redirects him upwards into the actual satellite which are just slave systems to what’s down here.”

“What if we physically wreck up this place?” Storm suggested. “Make it look like a generator overload or something and burn this place to the ground.”

“I like your enthusiasm, but it also wouldn’t help you with your overall problem,” Takum stated. “This is a remote site, which means that we can just go back to central command and reestablish a link with the satellite from there. No… if you want to take out Veilfire, you have to take out the satellite permanently.”

“Just… blow up the satellite?” Don asked. “You can do that?”

“With the amount of plasma generated from that thing it could very easily overload,” Takum replied, tapping his muzzle before swiveling back and typing on the computer once more. “A lot of the black box protocols mean that our equipment doesn’t even communicate with the rest of the servers on the base, but Solarflare is currently doing data compiling on their supercomputer in order to get ready for tonight’s test. If I get your friend to follow the digital breadcrumbs I could lead him through their supercomputer and into the Veilfire system where he can activate the geo-stabilization rockets and push the thing further out into space before it explodes.”

Don and Storm told him to get on it, then stepped away as they watched the fox continue to type while they had a mental discussion with one another on whether or not they could trust Takum. While it didn’t appear that he had set off any alarms or distress signals they didn’t know half of what was flying by the screen as he continued to work, which meant that there could be entire squad of soldiers out there waiting for them. They weren’t going to come in guns blazing, not with all the equipment and the grey fox in there, but eventually they would either storm in and just attempt to bring them down with tasers or somehow prompt them to leave. When they reached out to Newlyn they said they were busy talking to Solarflare on their side but didn’t see anything happening in their direction…

A sudden noise that came from the fox caused the two to bring themselves back to the present, looking down to see another window that wasn’t there before flashing with red and white colors. “What’s wrong?” Don asked. “Did the hacker trip an alarm or something?”

“No… well, not quite,” Takum replied as he continued to type, his face a mixture of curiosity and confusion as he continued to dig. “While I was leading your friend into the system through the black box gate I found a program that was running inside of, which shouldn’t be a thing because the only thing that the black box program does is keep other people out of the system. I’m trying to uncover what it is but whoever programmed this made it very elusive… it keeps collapsing gateways I’m trying to create in order to look at what’s been going this entire time.”

Takum leaned in even closer as he attempted to fool the program several different ways, sifting through all the junk data it was sending him before finally he managed to gain a foothold in the program. When he managed to crack the code another wall of numbers and text filled the entire screen, but after a few seconds it translated itself into a single image that showed a rather large object that the two Gaia creatures assumed was the Veilfire satellite. Though they had little idea of what was going on it appeared their new vulpine friend knew exactly what was happening as he went to another monitor and began to frantically type into it.

“No no no, come on…” Takum said as he brought up the next screen, only for the two Gaia creatures to see more lines of code flashing by. “No! This can’t be happening!”

“What’s wrong?” Don asked.

“The program is wiping all the Veilfire authentication protocols!” Takum explained hastily as he took out a laptop and fumbled with the cord to plug it in. “I can’t believe I didn’t see this coming, Dr. Sarkov was notorious for booby-traps when it came to anything he touched that the military seized… but no one thought he would spike his own project. If I can’t regain control of the system before we lose our Master authentication protocols…”

The fox was sitting on the floor as he yanked out several wires from the back of the console, the two creatures watching as the screens all went dead before he took them and hooked them up to the laptop. Considering the severity of the situation the two remained quiet as Takum began to type, though as they stood there they began to hear a strange buzzing noise that was increasing in intensity. They slowly turned back towards the equipment that saw that a black smoke had started to seep out of its vents as the acrid smell of burning metal and plastic filled the air. Both Don and Storm leapt over the console and dragged Takum with them towards the back wall as the servers suddenly were engulfed in showers of sparks, components bursting into flame as they covered themselves from overloaded equipment.

The three slowly looked up from the position they had taken behind one of the couches as the last of the sparks flew out, tongues of fire beginning to lap against the components as they stared in stunned silence. Don was the first to recover, hopping over the couch and grabbing a fire extinguisher to douse the flames while Storm went and opened a window to clear out the smoke. As they got the situation under control they could see Takum slowly walking around the couch, the computer dangling from the corner he was holding onto as he slumped onto the cushions. The only words they could see on the screen were Connection Lost and as they asked if he was alright he merely shook his head.

“It’s all gone…” Takum said numbly. “Sarkov’s trojan not only scrubbed our permissions but overloaded the servers here and back at central command. I can only imagine the fire there… but he effectively took out all the Master programs that controlled the satellite.”

“Well… that’s great, isn’t it?” Storm said. “If no one can control the satellite then Veilfire is dead in the water, isn’t it?” Once more Takum just stood there, slowly pulling up his googles and rubbing his eyes. “Isn’t it?”

“It might have been…” Takum finally explained. “But as a slave system this means it’s just going to carry out the last order given to it, the one that I saw Dr. Sarcov send up just before he destroyed our systems…”

“What order?” Don asked, the two Gaia creatures looking at one another before moving to the couch and kneeling in front of the fox. “Takum, what was the last order that was given to Veilfire?”

“Lose orbit, overload the plasma furnace…” the fox paused, swallowing hard before looking up at them. “…and crash Velifire into the Starpoint Facility.”

“Okay, well that doesn’t sound good at all,” Don said as they stood back up. “Tell the others to meet us up here with Solarflare if possible, we got a big problem.”

“I just did,” Storm replied. “They said they’re dealing with a problem too, some sort of accidental transformation?”

“Tell them that our problem is a little bigger than that!” Don stated, jumping slightly as another spark came out of the melted servers behind him.

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“So instead of us stopping Veilfire from firing on the mountain range in an attempt to kill the Bal’Kar,” Newlyn summarized as they stood in the partially charred lodge, Takum still working on his laptop while Solarflare looked through the wreckage as best he could, especially with the fennec fox still transforming. “Veilfire is going to fall on top of Starpoint Facility and kill… everyone.” The snow leopard scratched the back of his head as Don and Storm nodded. “It appears our situation has not improved guys.”

“To be fair Takum thinks that the program tripped the first time they test fired the satellite,” Don explained. “Best we can figure Sarkov wanted to make sure that they used it first, then caused it to crash to not only take out the Bal’Kar but also turn the entire thing into an international incident. It would give the military a black eye because they would say they were using technology they didn’t understand and make Sarkov look like he had been wrongfully persecuted and disgraced by the military all along.”

“But if Takun is right about the blast radius is going to cause…” Erin said as she looked over at the grey fox hard at work. “It’s not just going to wipe out Starpoint and this military base, he thinks that if the furnace is overloaded the plasma spread could reach a couple hundred miles. That’s…”

“Carson City…” Storm stated. “Las Vegas… we’re looking at casualty counts in the millions here. Entire cities burned to ash, whole ecosystems wiped out... it’s going to make the test fire look like a pleasant day at the beach.”

“That’s insane,” Don said. “I’ve heard rumors about Sarkov but is he really willing to kill that many people just to get back at the people who fired him?”

“Have you ever heard of the Casanova Incident?” Newlyn stated, Don and Storm shaking their heads. “There’s a reason why no one talks about the Casanova Incident. Let’s just say that this man is completely deranged and there’s a reason both the Bal’Kar and the military want him out of the picture.”

The five continued to discuss what they were going to do, but the options were looking bleak. With a blast radius that large there was no where that anyone could run for safety and if the two fox’s calculations were correct then the only place that might have been able to survive the wave of superheated plasma was right where the satellite was going to land. Plus with all their equipment out they had no idea when it was going to happen, though Takun stated it would be whenever the furnace was charged enough to reach critical mass. After that point they would probably only have a few minutes before Veilfire lost orbit and crashed into the earth and unleash hell on earth.

In the more immediate vicinity Takum was attempting the hundredth reconnect to Veilfire when he heard someone shout ouch, looking up to see Solarflare sitting there holding his paw in his other forepaw as a dot of crimson ran down it. He set down the laptop and immediately went over to help him, attempting to pull out the metal sliver with his finger tips before reaching in with his teeth. “You know I could have done that,” Solarflare said with a slight grin as Takum extracted the piece and spit it out back into the pile of debris. “I may be turning into a strange tentacle creature but that doesn’t mean I can’t help myself.”

“I know that,” Takum stated, looking down at him sitting on his hindpaws like a feral would, seeing nubs already starting to poke out of his sides that would soon form into tentacles. “Are you sure becoming this? Erin said that they might be able to fix you before the changes are complete.”

“I think we have bigger fish to fry at the moment,” Solarflare replied, watching Takum get up and grab the first aid kit before coming back to bandage up the wound. “If we don’t figure out what to do soon we’re all going to be transformed into dust.”

“Ugh, that does sound like a terrible thing to transform into,” Takum replied as he attempted a grin, his face falling a bit as he began to wrap up the injured paw. “Do you think it’s our fault? I know it was the military that took over Veilfire but we were the ones that ran the program for them, maybe if we had said something…”

“Then someone else would have come in our place and it’s possible they wouldn’t have come across the trojan program at all,” Solarflare replied. “The only reason that we are able to actually do something about this situation is because you realized that what we were doing was wrong and when you tried to make it right you found what Dr. Sarkov was planning.”

“I suppose…” Takum replied. “Maybe it was for thbt bedth…” the grey fox stopped talking when his words began to come out garbled, his tongue starting to feel numb as he attempted to reign it back in even as he felt it hanging out past his lips. “Whapt iph gophn on?”

“Oh, Takum… your face…” Solarflare said as his eyes widened slightly, pressing his forepaws against the other vulpine as his angular nose began to swell while his jaw stretched and cracked. “Hey, someone help here!” Once more Takum attempted to say something but as he attempted to shake his head he could feel his skull reforming, like someone was molding out of clay. It was just like what the other fox was feeling with his body as his own changes had spread outwards to the point tentacles were starting to push out his modified shoulders.

“What’s going on-“ Storm started to say before he saw Takum and Solarflare looking up at him, one with the head of a fox and the body of a Gaia creature while the other was vice versa. “Oh for crying… Erin! Get over here! It appears our influence is spreading?”

Erin quickly walked over and asked what he meant before he saw a second changing creature and gasped slightly. “How did that happen?!” It took a minute but eventually Takum’s muzzle proportions returned to normal and he said that he had just taken out a silver with his mouth and as they were talking he began to change into a Gaia creature himself. “It must be this place… I mean I didn’t realize how strong our powers were getting because we were up in the mountains.”

“To be fair our powers were pretty strong up there too,” Storm stated. “You were growing ten to twenty-foot trees in a valley in the middle of the mountains. I could only imagine the explosion of growth that would have happened if all this had happened around here.”

Erin bobbed her head back and forth as though in agreement, but as she thought about it her mind gabbed onto what Storm had just said as well as what had just happened. The gears in her mind slowly began to churn as a plan was forming, one that banked a lot on these newfound powers that were experiencing. She immediately called the rest of the Gaia creatures into a mental meeting so that they could conference even faster, everyone getting slightly startled at first when they heard two new voices as the Gaia fennec fox and Gaia grey fox found themselves able to join in. The entire lodge was silent as their minds came together to run with the idea Erin just had, all of them building off of one another until they came up with something that looked like a plan.

“Why don’t we have Don and Storm go to the top brass and see if they can put their part into play instead of our newest converts,” Erin said as they looked over and saw that both had started to play around by wrapping their newly grown furry tentacles around one another. “Or at least give them some time until they’re completely done. Chaos and I can raid the greenhouse and Newlyn can snag a radio and try to contact the Bal’Kar… hopefully they’re still listening or else this whole thing goes downhill really quick.”

A few minutes later all the officers met in the central meeting lodge, the owl sitting down in the front seat which caused all the others to sit down as well. “Alright, let’s get this meeting started with the first item on the docket,” the owl said, looking around to see a lot of confused faces in the room. “Well, come on then, who called this meeting in the first place?”

“Sir…” the orca said as he leaned in. “We were all told on the phone that you had ordered this meeting.”

“Actually that would be us,” Don said as he and Storm walked in, both of them standing at the other end of the table as the officers chattered with each other in confusion until the dragon slammed his hand down on the table and got their attention. “We don’t have a lot of time so I’ll cut to the quick; Sarkov screwed you, the link to Veilfire is busted, and the whole thing is about to crash to the earth and kill us all. Any questions before we continue?”

The entire lodge erupted into shouts, everything from questions of what they meant by their exclamations to demands of what was happening. It was only when the owl screeched and told them all to shut up that everyone calmed down enough to sit back in their seats. “I remember you…” the owl officer said as he pointed at Don before moving over to Storm. “Both of you, you were the leaders of the teams we sent in to scout the mountains. Now what you say has dire consequences, but how do we know you’re not some new kind of Bal’Kar?”

“Because they’re something new,” a third voice joined them, Solarflare and Takum jumping up onto the table in their Gaia forms as the grey fox continued to speak after everyone had sufficiently gasped. “And whether or not you believe them we did lose control of Veilfire, now these guys have a plan and it’s the one chance we have of not dying in a storm of plasma.” The two moved to the edge of the table, but before he did he looked back at the shocked owl officer. “By the way, it’s Takum.”

“Right,” Storm said as he brought all their shocked attentions back them. “Remember that insta-wall idea where you were going to use panels to try and contain the Bal’Kar before everyone realized it would be pointless because they can burrow and it was stupid idea? We may have some use for the prototypes after all…”

Meanwhile Erin and Chaos reverted back to their Gaia forms and used their tentacles to break into the greenhouse, the two heading inside once they had gotten the door opened. Both of them could feel their chests swelling with energy as they felt all the young growth in the room, breathing out before putting their focus back to the task. “There’s certainly a lot of stuff here…” Chaos said as he looked at the huge bags of top soil. “How much do we take?”

“All of it…” Erin replied as a grin crossed her muzzle.