Friends From Beginning to End

\*some years ago\*

The small park was busy on a Saturday; people from all over the city would come to the beautiful lakeside area in order to entertain their children or go and enjoy the company of one another. The reason that this park was so special was because it was one of the few areas in the normally rocky terrain that held such verdant life, a slice of green in an otherwise grey and white existence. For Erin, Newlyn, and Chaos it was a place where they would walk after completing a rough day in the training facility in the city or come after their classes. The wooded paths made for a great time reflecting as the three friends moved through the quiet woods away from the trail that most people ran down for exercise.

The other two looked around while the feral kitsune led the way, not being sure what they were in for since their leader refused to tell them what was going on. All they knew was that she showed up to the park with several bags that they had no idea how she managed to pack her self and a vague, cryptic clue that they were about to go on an adventure. The other two just shrugged and decided to go along with it, taking their respective bags that they were assigned before trudging them through the park and through the woods. Though it wasn’t particularly hot out they had been walking for nearly a half an hour with no end in sight and both males were starting to feel their arms burn from the exhertion.

“So give it to me straight Erin,” Newlyn said as he adjusted the bag over his other shoulder, being careful with it since he was told it was fragile. “Are you bringing us out into the middle of the woods to kill us? Because I believe by law you have to tell us that you’re going to kill us if we ask.”

‘Oh hush you,” Erin replied as she cocked her head back and stuck her tongue out at him. “You say that like you would know it was coming.”

“Nah, I think I might be with Newlyn on this one,” Chaos said as he let out a slightly tired sigh. “You get us to carry around all this stuff, getting tired in the process, and then when we least expect it you strike. Then you would go on the news while they look for our bodies and give them that sweet and innocent act on how it’s so strange that your two friends wandered off into the middle of the woods and how you have no idea where they could be.”

“Yep, you totally got me,” Erin said back. “I spent years gaining your trust and making you believe that we were best friends so that today I could lure you out here and take your wallet money before burying you here.”

“Knew it,” Newlyn said with a smirk.

For about ten more minutes they continued their hike until finally they heard a gasp from the kitune before she ran forward. “Here it is!” Erin said happily as the three finally made their way out of the trees and found themselves on a small cliff that overlooked the entire lake. “Beautiful, am I right? I saw this spot while we were driving by last time and I thought it would be perfect for one of our last picnics together!”

“Awww, don’t say that Erin,” the white and grey furred husky said as he walked over towards the edge and looked down. “They might all send us all to the same place, it’s not like we’re in competing fields or anything like that. Plus they put that spot in the application line that asks if there is anyone that you would be preferred to be placed with and I definitely put you two guys.”

“I thought I heard someone say that they do that so they can intentionally separate people that might be sleeping together and such,” the snow leopard replied, causing the husky’s mouth to drop. “So when they see that Chaos wants to be with Newlyn and Erin they might just think that it would be too much trouble and ship us all off to different parts of the state. You’ve doomed us all Chaos!”

“Oh don’t be silly Newlyn,” Erin replied as she stuck her tongue out, the quadruped using her mouth to help straighten out the blanket as the two giggled at the panicked look on the husky’s face. “They don’t just ask you who you want to be with and then separate you. It’s more likely they want you to stay with your friends so that you stay with the company longer, otherwise there might be less incentive to go where you’re told and as soon as the contract is up you’re out of there.”

“I guess that makes sense,” the grinning snow leopard replied. “You would know best, you are the one going into human resources after all.”

The three continued to talk about life after the program as they set up their little picnic spot, speculation turning to reminiscing as they looked out over the lake at the mountains beyond. All three of them had been friends since they could remember, going through all of school together and then trying to find jobs together before eventually enrolling in a program that would automatically place them in a job at one of the many research facilities scattered about the states. While they assumed that they would all be sent to the closest one, which was in the next state, they were eventually shocked to find out that the training centers had you move to wherever you were needed. By that point it was too late to get out of their contract, all they could do was hope for the best.

As the hours rolled by and the sun began to set over the mountains Chaos sat on the blanket looking at his phone while Erin and Newlyn sat on the edge of the cliff, the feral kitsune sitting there while Newlyn had his legs dangling over the edge. None of them were talking at the moment, merely enjoying the company of one another as they digested both the meal and their conversation. Their last picnic together… with the end of the term coming up those words felt more real than ever. Soon even that was going to come to an end as the blues in the sky had started to turn to yellows and fading into orange.

“Do you really think they’d separate us?” Erin asked, her tails wagging about nervously as she asked the question that was on everyone’s minds. “I know they don’t have any reason to keep us together, but… I was kind of hoping that they wouldn’t.”

“I don’t know in all honesty,” Newlyn replied with a sigh. “While we all said we wanted to be with one another if there is a facility that needs a researcher and another that needs a human resources person then they’re going to put us where the slots need filling. Can’t tell them to hire on an extra person to a full team just because we wanted to stick together.”

The two looked down at the still waters of the lake below, trying to find some other means to reassure one another when they suddenly heard the husky behind them call out for them to come over. The two looked back to see that he was staring excitedly at the screen on his phone and when they came over towards him he immediately flipped it over so they could see the headline. “They’ve just announced the opening of a new research facility!” the husky said as the two leaned in to see the article. “Not only is it local but they said that they want it completely staffed as soon as possible, which is probably why they made such a big push in the town about people going through the program.”

“The Starpoint Research Facility,” Newlyn read as his eyes flicked from left to right. “Sources say that the facility will be state of the art and is currently near completion as well as the military base that will surround it, expecting to bring in hundreds of jobs.” The snow leopard found himself grinning as he leaned back. “So not only a research facility job but a government funded one, talk about security.”

“It goes on a bit about economy revitalization and stuff like that but basically they’re going to raid the town and anyone who wants a job up there will get one regardless of whether or not they went through the program,” the husky stated. “We’ll get priority naturally, and that means we’re all going to stay together!”

“Yay!” Erin exclaimed as she put her forepaws up in the air. “Hugs for everyone!”

The three came in and hugged one another at the kitsune’s request, all of them elated at the information that they had just received. A job at a military-funded research facility, it was one of the best possible outcomes that they could have gotten from enrolling in the program together and they were all going to it at the same time. They all began to chat happily to one another as what had been set as their last picnic was suddenly a celebratory dinner, though as they continued to try and read through the article on Chaos’ phone they realized that part of the problem was that it was getting dark. The three decided they would look more into it later and began to pick up their stuff, putting it away so they could get back through the woods before they were picking their way through the dark.

“Wait!” Erin said as she took the pack that had been slung around her back and shifted so that it fell gently to the ground. “We have to take a photo before we go, I want to capture this moment in time forever!”

“You sure you want to do this now?” Chaos asked as he glanced over at the sun disappearing behind the mountains. “Not sure how good the light is going to be.”

“I didn’t drag this camera stuff all the way up here just for the exercise!” Erin stated as she unzipped the bag with her teeth. “Originally I was going to take it so that in case we did get separated I would have something to remember you guys by, but even if we’re still going to be around one another I want the photo. Newlyn, could you do me the honors?”

The snow leopard nodded and grabbed the camera out of the bag as well as the tripod, setting it up so that they were standing on the cliff looking out into the lake. After a few moments however Newlyn frowned and said that wasn’t going to work because there wasn’t a lot of space to move around and they were going to catch some of the sun no matter what. That didn’t deter the kitsune though and instead they shifted things over so that they were facing the woods instead. Luckily it was still light enough that they didn’t need a flash and once Chaos and Erin were in their proper positions Newlyn set the self-timer and got in on the other side of the kitsune.

“Alright everyone,” Erin said as they saw the red light on the camera blinking faster and faster. “Say, awesome trio!”

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\*present day\*

Deep in the recesses of the caves underneath the Starpoint facility the entire cavern glowed with an unearthly green light that came from the pools of bio-extract that had formed in the stone. In its light black, fleshy tendrils could be seen growing over the stone, burrowing in deeper in order to continue to build up the hive that had taken root there. Though most of the liquid was still one near the middle began to bubble and churn, the creature underneath disturbing the surface as the monstrous head of a Bal’Kar pushed up and broke the surface tension. Its glowing green eyes scanned the area for a few seconds before it continued to move out, the goo dripping off his four large head tentacles and the spikes that adorned his brow and back of his head. Soon the entire creature breached out of the pool, its body tentacles easily moving along the stone in order to head further up through the cave.

He wasn’t the only one there; after the fall of the Starpoint Facility there were now dozens, maybe even hundreds of Bal’Kar that nested there. They all shared in the spreading of the hive, their massive bodies quickly outgrowing both the original facility and the caves that they foolishly thought could contain them. As he passed by several others he could feel them send a small bit of lust in his direction, a customary greeting as he returned the favor as he passed by. More than once he saw two or more of the tentacle creatures in the grasp of one another, breeding and passing eggs while becoming nothing more then a slimy mass of pure euphora… but as much as he would have liked to join in he had been summoned by another with some urgency.

Eventually the Bal’Kar made it to the original chamber, the one that had started it all and spotted a single one of his brethren resting in an extract pool similar to the one that he had just escaped. Neither of them needed to talk outwardly, as he came in he could feel through their web what was being said as though receiving a text message that he could read instantly. “Come in Newlyn,” the other Bal’kar said. “Make yourself at home, we have something that we need to discuss.”

Newlyn quickly nodded his head and slithered forward before sliding into the pool, bio-extract splashing around as their faces met and slurpers entwined around one another. He had to adjust his jaw slightly to take into account the saber teeth that slid past the outside of his lips as their maws locked together in a typical Bal’Kar embrace. Though there was no such thing as a leader amongst their kind this one was the first, coming into the Starpoint facility and eventually taking it over in a mess of goo and spores. Every creature in that mountain owed their current forms to him, the two eventually breaking away and having their glowing green tongues slide back into their own maws.

“What did you need me for Serathin?” Newlyn asked as he wrapped his tentacles around the other creature, both their lusts increasing. “From the urgency it didn’t sound like merely a social call. Is the hive in danger?”

“Nothing like that,” Serathin sent back. “In fact it’s just the opposite, have you had your clutch recently?”

“Just laid a few hours ago,” Newlyn reported. “Why?”

“I recently learned through my poking around in the military database that one of the satellites that monitors this place to make sure we don’t spread is going down for maintenance,” Serathin explained, the lust vibrating strongly in the other Bal’Kar as he felt the breeder of the other creature begin to slide into his grappler abdomen. Though both creatures were getting heavily aroused by the feel of their bodies coming together they still maintained enough of their thoughts to continue with the conversation. “It’s a short window but I think it’s enough for you to slip out and enjoy a little day trip back to your old hometown.”

Newlyn paused as he thought back to his home town… it had been so long since he had visited it even before he had been gifted the form of the Bal’Kar, up until Serathin had mentioned it hadn’t even crossed his mind. “How long do I have to prepare?” he asked. “Is this just a quick stop to say high or will I be there for a while?”

“The maintenance window comes in two stages,” Serathin explained. “The first one happens tonight and only lasts a couple of minutes, so you’re going to have to get ready to leave as soon as I give you the signal. Then there’s a secondary shutdown three days later that happens for about two minutes, but by that point it’s more about getting you back to the hive instead of worrying about sneaking you out and getting a tail. I also think it would be prudent of you to take Erin and Chaos along, since they also came from there and you three are as thick as thieves.”

Newlyn felt his excitement build when he heard that his two fellow Bal’Kar and bed friends were coming along with him, almost instantly translating that information through their psychic webs and then getting back a reply of similar excitement when it resonated back. Just then he was interrupted as he began to feel something sliding into his abdomen, the breeder cock that had been pumping systematically into him bulging before something slid out of it and into him. It was the first of nearly a dozen eggs that were pumped into his sack from the other Bal’Kar, which made him feel pleasantly full again after having just laid his last batch. Though both creatures would have preferred to stay this way they needed to revert back into their guise forms so they could make their way through the infested facility.

After the last of the eggs he was going to get from the other Bal’Kar were deposited Newlyn got up from the pool and began to shift, his body immediately beginning to shrink as the seethers that made up his form became more compact. The tentacles that made up most of his body shrank back or melded into his form as his abdomen retracted, taking the eggs he had gotten and distributed them around his body so they wouldn’t bulge out his form unnecessarily. As fur began to appear on his shrinking muzzle the disintegrators on his head seemed to slurp their way up into it while his spikes did the same. When he finally got small enough and his legs reappeared he always took a second to get used to standing on two feet again, especially after nothing having been in guise for so long as his disproportionally large glowing green cock also shrank until it matched his body.

Finally as his controller tentacles closed their eyes and disappeared into his shoulders he looked over to see that Serathin had shifted back as well, shiny black rubber skin replaced with black and purple fur. One of the last things left to change was his slurper tongue, letting it dangle in the air for a while before retracting into his maw. Though the two were ready to head back up into the Starpoint Facility proper they decided to wait for the other two that were coming along, eventually spotting two more pairs of glowing green eyes coming up from deep in the caves. One of them had already started to shrink back down into their guise form as well, tan fur sprouting on various parts of her body as several of the flailing tentacles shifted and turned into multiple tails.

As Erin reformed back into her kitsune self the one next to her wasn’t far behind, the ring of spikes around his thick neck that represented a collar retracting back into his body as bright blue lines began to appear on his form. As the husky continued his transition Erin shouted Serathin’s name and ran up for a hug, then doing the same to the snow leopard as they grinned at one another. Eventually Chaos finished as well, bowing to the one he called master as well as to Serathin before stating that he had already gotten a big slimy hug from the kitsune. Once the four had finished changing completely they climbed their way up the elevator shaft, the car long since destroyed with more than two Bal’kar got inside of it changing someone during their takeover, and hopped inside the observation room.

“Hard to believe that a mere few months ago I was being watched and studied from here,” Serathin reminisced as they heard the sound of the metal under their feet groaning in distress. “But we’re not here to walk down memory lane, we need to get you three ready for an incursion into your old stomping grounds. Hopefully you all kept a bit of clothing, otherwise your trip down is going to be very interesting.”

“No worries here,” Erin responded with a chuckle as they made their way through the tentacle infested hallways back towards the dormitories. Since most Bal’Kar didn’t prefer to be in their guise form the sleeping area of the facility had been largely abandoned, a mere reminder of what their lives had been before they had all become the creatures they were now. While some people did take mementos into the caves it had to be stuff that would survive constantly being covered in bio-extract… which meant most people just left them in their old rooms to keep them safe. The only one that didn’t have an assigned room was Serathin himself, having been shipped in via train in order to be studied by this very facility.

“Hard to believe we used to consider comfortable,” Erin said as she jumped on one of the beds that belonged to Chaos and Newlyn in their room, the springs and base beneath them cracking with her immense weight as soon as she sat on it. “One of the disadvantages of being a Bal’Kar, can’t go jumping on the bed anymore.”

The others just smiled and nodded as they packed up their things, trying to think of what they would need in order to sell themselves as normal creatures in a town that was very likely to be on the alert. While the mountains kept the Bal’Kar of the Starpoint Facility from spreading, aided by the military ready to bombard them into the stone age should they try, they no doubt knew of and were weary about their neighbors. Thankfully their guises were almost exactly like their former selves, save for their eyes that still glowed with an unnatural green light, something that they would have to figure out how to hide while on the way. As Newlyn opened up one of his dresser drawers he saw something that caused him to pause, the small grin on his face turning into a smile as he pulled out the frame and ushered the others to come over and look.

“Now that is an awesome trio,” Chaos remarked, the other two chuckling as they looked at themselves in the picture. “Man, that reminds me of when we first got this room…”

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

\*some years ago\*

Newlyn set down the picture of the three of them back down on the desk, trying to find the perfect spot for it as he heard the husky attempting to put his sheets on the bed they had been issues. “I should have known not to buy the king-sized sheets,” Chaos said with a huff as he looked down at the mess of covers that he had created. “I mean I sort of figured that they wouldn’t be giving us that large of a bed, but I figured that if we were sharing a room they would have at least sprung for something larger then a twin.”

“Considering they carved this entire place out of a mountain I think they were thinking more of how to cram several dozen people down here instead of size preference,” Newlyn replied with a chuckle. “Plus you never know, maybe once you get higher up in the facility you’ll get your own private room with the king mattress that you can finally put your sheets on.”

“Well it’s not the company that I mind,” the husky stated as he started to attempt to tuck the excess sheet under the bed. “It’s the accommodations, packing their entry-level researchers in here like sardines. Erin probably has her own room with one of those big beds and two nightstands.”

“Plus a fountain in the middle of the room too, don’t forget that,” Erin stated as the two turned to see the smiling kitsune standing there at their doorframe. “During the weekend they fill it with chocolate and you can bathe in it before going to your own private jacuzzi. It’s nice, you should come by sometime.”

“You better believe I would be there for chocolate fountain fondue baths,” Chaos said as he stuck his tongue out. “Already settled in?”

“Yeah,” Erin stated as she hopped up on Newlyn’s bed just as he was about to put his own covers on it. “Nice thing about being a feral is that material requirements are not as high, and since there are so few in the facility I actually do have my own room… though I think they may have just converted a storage closet and put me inside.”

“So you’re saying we know who to contact in order to get our cleaning supplies,” Newlyn joked. The kitsune looked like she was about ready to respond but just then they heard a knock at the door that caused them all to stop and look. Standing there was a white Siberian tiger in a lab coat and a husky in a military uniform with a rather impressive amount of metals on him. “Oh, hello there, we were just settling in sir.”

“At ease,” the husky stated. “We’re just doing the rounds here and making sure everyone is finding what they need. I am Major Amaro, head of security and military forces, and the one you’ll be reporting to is Dr. August Winters on my left here.”

“It’s great to see you all here with a positive attitude,” the tiger said, his eyes flitting over to the larger canine next to him before glancing back to the one on the bed. “You must be Erin, I heard that human resources was getting a feral on their team and I just wanted to say if there’s anything else we can do to make your job more accommodating let me know. And then you two are… Newlyn… and Chaos, am I right?”

The two nodded and shook both their hands, Erin coming up and giving them both a hug instead that surprised them both. “Right then,” Major Amaro stated once as he brushed off his uniform and cleared his throat. “We’re going to be having a security briefing tonight at twenty-one hundred hours and another one at nine hundred hours tomorrow. This is mandatory for all personnel and a lot of information is going to be given to you, so we’ve prepared a little welcome packet that you will be expected to read over and bring with you to these meetings so you can remember what is said there.”

Though both Newlyn and Chaos both had more questions the military husky said they were dismissed and practically dragged the tiger over to the next room, the two of them seeing a panther in similar soldier attire coming in and giving them each a portfolio before exiting wordlessly. The three looked at one another for a few seconds and then back to the door, half-expecting someone else to come though before they gathered that they were once more alone. They looked down at the binders they had been given and when they opened it up they were surprised to find page after page of safety guidelines. It never seemed to end and there was even space in the back with a few blank pages where they could write more if they suddenly come up.

“I think I’ve seen handbooks for nuclear power plants that are less complicated then this,” Chaos said as he read through them. “Anyone caught in section C of the facility without proper authorization will be arrested? What the hell is in section C?”

“Nothing apparently,” Newlyn replied as he turned over the binder to show them the map page he had found and tapped in the area that was completely blacked out. “The only indicator they have for that section is that its some sort of observation area. Everything else appears to be above our paygrade.”

The three looked at one another anxiously as the weight of where they were seemed to hit them for the first time. While they had known that being recruited for any facility that had military ties to it was bound to have some level of secrecy to it they hadn’t quite figured on how much until this moment. As they continued to flip though it a lot of the rules were related to containment procedures and a number of alarm codes concerning labs and the agents that were contained. There was even a list of what to do and where to be when those codes were called, everything incredibly and meticulously laid out for them.

“Well all this is fun and all,” Erin said as she closed the binder and took the loop around it to go over her neck so she could carry it with her. “But I heard that there was going to be cake and ice cream down in the mess hall for everyone once they’ve moved in, and I’m not going to miss it because we’re trying to figure out military procedure for the first time.” She hopped off the bed and headed towards the door, her tails waving in the air as she looked back at them. “Well, you guys coming or what?”

The two didn’t have to be told twice as they tossed their security books aside to go down to the mess hall, Newlyn’s landing right next to the picture of them that he had taken out…

Part 2:

\*present day\*

“You know,” Newlyn said as he looked through the binder he had found, flipping through the pages of the rules that had been laid down for the Starpoint Facility before it had been taken over by the Bal’Kar as they waited for the signal. “I wonder if they ever realized that as soon as people started to get converted that everyone who was briefed on this would have given the playbook over to us. I mean, we’re a hivemind, the second someone with this information gets assimilated everyone in the hive knows what’s going on when they attempted to implement these things.”

“Well there is a reason why Bal’Kar are the superior species!” Erin said chipperly as she looked around the nearly empty garage. It was one of the few places that had initially gone untouched when they had first taken over the place; it was detached from the rest of the facility to serve as a motorpool for people who needed to visit the nearby military base or go to the town they were about to visit for emergencies, and since that rarely happened no one was inside when they had struck. By the time others realized the facility had been completely compromised they had already closed off the main garage that the military used, so it was one of the few places free from their corruptive influence.

It was one of the reasons that they had snuck there in the first place. Serathin informed them that even with their primary spy satellite down they may have back-ups just in case they had found out about the shutdown, but it was likely going to be smaller cameras focused heavily on main points such as the primary facility exit and the collapsed military hanger that led down into the hive. Even with that assertion however they continued to keep a low profile while they stayed inside, which meant they would have to wait and not even start up the vehicle they were taking. It was a small armored transport module used mainly for hauling heavy machinery, which they hoped would also haul them given their immense weight.

Chaos had been checking out the vehicle in the down time and even though it was reinforced they could tell if more than one person went into the front they were going to have a problem. Since Erin couldn’t drive due to her feral nature Chaos was the next lightest that was going to drive and when he sat in the driver’s seat the cab was practically against the concrete. That meant the other two were going to have to sit in the windowless back and try not to slide around since there were no seats inside the back of the modified carrier. Everything had to go smoothly to make sure that they got out of the spy satellite’s detection radius before it completed the maintenance cycle, which even with Serathin stalling the reboot process was only going to be about eight minutes at maximum.

But one can only remain on high alert for so long and with the system still on-line all the three could do was sit around and weight, the only thing they heard in the cold, clear night was the occasional breeze of wind that whistled through the windows. “At this rate we’re going to have to revert back to our true forms before we get out of here,” Newlyn said with a sigh, tossing the book aside and pinging Serathin to ask if they were ready yet only to be told to hold once more. “I don’t mind waiting a bit to expand the hive but I’m starting to get the itch.”

The other two knew what Newlyn was talking about, nodding slowly. Being creatures of lust they were used to being able to breed whenever they wanted when they were down in the caverns, now that they had to not only maintain their disguises but stay on guard to make sure that they were ready to go as soon as the signal happened was already starting to get them a little pent up. But they weren’t going to succumb to their desires just yet when they had the chance to get out of the facility and go back to their old home town. Soon they would be experiencing an entirely different kind of pleasure, one that came from them laying the foundation to spread their influence.

Suddenly the three of them nearly jumped in unison when they heard Serathin practically shout at them through the web that it was time to move, the three of them piling into the personal carrier and starting up the engine. “Been a while since I’ve driven anything,” Chaos stated as he put the car into gear and began to drive out. “Just like riding a bike, right?”

“I mean, sure, if the bike is a couple tons and was capable of going through a brick wall,” Newlyn said as he settled in, looking at one of the few tablets that survived the initial incursion. “Just get us out of here, I’m linked up with Serathin’s computer so I’ll know how close we are.”

The husky nodded and honked the horn before accelerating… very slowly out of the garage and onto the street. Though it was capable of hauling very heavy things speed was not its strong suit, and since they were going down a mountain they couldn’t exactly just fly down the road without risking taking a turn to hard and rolling over. If the military found out they had tried to make a break for it when their satellite was shut down not only would they no longer think they could contain the threat but it also meant they would figure out that the sabrewolf Bal’Kar had gotten into their systems. One of the reasons Starpoint was such a high priority for them to keep was the pipeline that they had managed to force open to their network using the military-grade hardware that had been left behind that they thought was destroyed during the incursion.

As Chaos kept his eyes on the road Newlyn and Erin both watched as their marker, seen only by them and Serathin, slowly made its way towards the red line that indicated the range of the spy satellite above them. The entire time there was a clock in the corner that counted down how long until it was back online, and as they watched their dot go back and forth along the road winding down the mountain it looked like they were going to be fine. Just as they were about to breathe a sigh of relief however they suddenly saw the three in the minute section of the clock skip over to a one, the box flashing red that the reboot cycle was almost complete. When they asked Serathin what was going on he told them that the update they installed must have eliminated the redundancy upload that he had installed to give them more time.

“Chaos, are we still going straight for next minute?” Newlyn called out, seeing their dot skirting the edge of the border as the one minute ticked over to zero and the seconds began to count it down.

“No the road is going to switch back once more!” Chaos shouted, the snow leopard fearing he would hear that as he saw the white line that represented the road they were on curving and bringing them further back into the range of the satellite before finally taking them out.

“You’re going to have to take a shortcut!” Newlyn stated as he saw half a minute left on the timer.

“No way Newlyn!” Chaos exclaimed. “It’s not a cliff but there’s a reason why they don’t have this road going straight down! If we shift at all going down it we’re going to roll!”

“If we don’t get outside of the range of the satellite the military is going to light us up!” Newlyn said as he motioned for Erin to try and hold onto something as best she could, the entire screen of the tablet flashing red with ten seconds left as it warned them they were still in range. “We’ll be fine, just do it!”

Two seconds later it felt like the drop fell out from the bottom of their stomach as Erin and Newlyn practically floated in the air as the vehicle launched itself off the road, other pieces of equipment doing the same as they heard the engine roaring. They had enough hang time for both of the Bal’Kar in the back to bump into one another as the APC continued to catapult forward through the air. The snow leopard still managed to hang onto the tablet the entire time and they watched as their dot sailed past the border just as the timer ticked down its last seconds, showing that they had cleared detection right as the satellite completely rebooted. There was only a split second to feel the victory as everything quite literally came crashing back down to earth.

The sound of metal hitting rock was ear-splitting as both Newlyn and Erin hit the ground hard, then flew back up in the air as the APC bounced on the edge of the hill before continuing its slide downwards. In the front of the cab Chaos had to manifest two of his tentacles just to keep the wheel from bucking out of his hand, making sure that they stayed as straight as possible to prevent a rollover. Several more bounces later he could feel the rubber of the tires practically getting scrapped off as he continued to hold it, though as they got close to the bottom he thought that he had managed to keep everything under control. Rock turned to gravel which then turned to dirt and with the Bal’Kar’s weight plus that of the engine Chaos practically snapped against the seat belt he was wearing as all the momentum they had gotten came to a sudden stop that almost threatened to flip over the entire vehicle.

Once things had settled down and the groaning of metal could no longer be heard Chaos quickly got out of the vehicle, which meant sliding out of the window since the door was partially underground at this point, and immediately ran to the back to check on the others. When the dented metal wouldn’t open for him initially he took a basher and sank the bony spike into it, ripping it away before using it to hoist himself inside. The insides were covered with bio-extract and laying near the front of the vehicle was Newlyn and Erin, both of them with large gashes exposed that were wiggling with seethers. The husky immediately got in and slid down to help them and as he saw them slowly regaining consciousness their bodies were already in the process of stitching up their guise form.

“Oh man, you two alright?” Chaos asked as he tried to help them to their feet, watching as seethers that had been lost came crawling back to their respective owners.

“We’re fine,” Newlyn said, his voice slightly garbled before there was a pop and his jaw relocated itself. “Takes more then that to kill a Bal’Kar, you know that. Good jump keeping us from getting tumbled around in here too much, had we rolled you’d probably be looking at some sort of kitsune and snow leopard hybrid.”

“You say that like we haven’t done such a thing before,” Erin responded with a wink before looking around. “Of course even though we’re going to come out of this in one piece we really can’t say the same thing about the car.”

“Wasn’t planning on taking it into town anyway,” Newlyn replied as the three of them hopped out of the wreckage. “Soon as someone ran the license plate and found out its registered to the Starpoint military base it would blow our cover. Still… I was kind of hoping that we wouldn’t have to walk through the woods at night, but here we are.”

The three of them looked at one another before sighing and walking into the darkness of the trees. It wasn’t that they had anything to worry about, they were more of a threat to anything in the woods then the other way around, but it also meant that they didn’t have much time to go hiking. They only had three days until the second reboot of the satellite and with the tablet completely smashed up in the car wreck they were going to have to keep tabs on the time with Serathin and the others to make sure they were at the spot to get back in. While their exit point had been the road their reentry point was a large mountain that was right behind the Starpoint facility that they weren’t monitoring as much because it was basically a natural wall, but the hike up was half a day in itself and with such a narrow window they couldn’t risk any delays.

That meant by the time they had gotten out of the woods and saw the sun starting to shine over the town that had been their target they had maybe two days to scout the place and try to plant a few Bal’Kar seeds. As they walked into the nearby clearing and could feel the dew against their bare fur both Newlyn and Chaos realized they also had another problem on their hands, looking down to see that their clothes had been fairly shredded by the accident and subsequent romp through the woods. Though they had one extra set each that they had brought along that was their last pair, which meant if anything happened to them they were going to have to try and find more clothes elsewhere as they hid in the tall grass while they changed. Once they were ready to go in they found an area where the plains met the back of a few houses and snuck their way through before entering into the town proper.

“Wow…” Erin said as they looked around the nearly empty street, people just getting ready to start their day as they stood there on the sidewalk. “When even was the last time that we were here?”

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\*some years ago\*

“We’re back baby!” Erin exclaimed as she hopped off the bus, Newlyn and Chaos right behind her as they set foot on the streets of their old town. For almost a year the Starpoint facility had been their home, and though they were friends with many of the people there having to eat, talk to, and otherwise socialize with the same people all day every day had gotten tiresome. Though at first it was extremely difficult to get the higher-ups to sign off on people leaving the base suddenly they were offering it hand over fist and even included a bus services to reach the nearby town. When asked why by all three they got varying comments of being told to just enjoy it while they can since soon they probably weren’t going to be able to leave at all for a while.

“So what should we do first?” Chaos asked. “I for one would like to see a movie in an actual theatre instead of trying to fight the others to see whatever has been released over a year ago that the facility got on video. I mean I know that we have highly sensitive information but they can’t get one streaming service to come in on those lines?”

“Well I know what I want to do,” Erin stated as she pointed her nose towards the park. “Have a picnic at the spot we found, maybe just walk around and enjoy the fresh air and sunshine. Being underground for so long can make you go stir crazy and being up in the mountains makes going outside quite the chilling experience.”

“Well I know what I want to do first,” Newlyn replied. “I don’t know about you but I’m starving and have been looking forward to eating something that I’ve actually chosen instead of being told what to eat if I wanted hot food. I’m thinking pizza, maybe Danny’s place?”

The others nodded and went down the street towards the Italian restaurant that was owned by a rather imposing dragon man named Mr. Marozza. Though the actual name was something in Italian hardly anyone ever used it, instead they just called it Danny’s place since one could normally find Danny Marozza, Mr. Marozza’s son, holding down the fort. Among other things Mr. Marozza was also a master electrician and plumber, so when he was out on the job it was Danny that kept the restaurant running while his father way away.

Sure enough when they got there they found the rather busy establishment manned by the bronze-scaled dragon, the three of them waving at him as they walked in before they found a booth to seat in. To their surprise he soon found Danny standing in front of their table. “Can I take an order for some of the prodigal children who have returned to grace us with their presence?” he said with a smirk, pulling out his tablet as they ordered an extra-large pizza and a calzone. “I’ve been seeing quite a few old faces coming back to the neighborhood, what gives? You all get homesick at once?”

“Starpoint is letting everyone out for a bunch of leave,” Erin said after stating her drink order. “Some big project is coming up that’s going to make visiting difficult so we decided to come down and get our fill before we’re all locked away again. Speaking of which I saw that your dad was one of the main contractors doing maintenance, did he manage to get away long enough to come down here and see you.”

“Nah, they also got him sequestered up there for some big expansion project,” Danny replied. “Has to keep all hush hush about it but he told me they got him working in some cave doing a bunch of really sophisticated electrical work. Said if he wasn’t there they’d probably have to bring in a specialist; which is great for our wallets but not so good if we want to keep remembering what his ugly mug looked like. Anyway let me go put this in so I’m not talking your ear off all day.”

The three nodded and as they waited for and subsequently ate their food they mentioned how strange it was hearing about their work like they were some sort of celebrities. Also hearing what Danny’s dad was working on made them wonder if that had something to do with this secret project they were all about to get sequestered for? When their food came Danny talked to them for a bit more, then came back once they had finished and made sure everything was alright. Everyone, especially Newlyn as he patted his full stomach, thanked him for the food and conversation before asking what the total came too.

“Ah, don’t worry bout it,” the dragon said with a wave of his hands. “This pie is on me.”

“Wow, really?” Chaos asked. “You didn’t have to do that for us.”

“That’s alright, I actually didn’t!” Danny replied with a grin as he put the bill down in front of them. “You all makin that science money out there can foot it to the poor pizza guys like me.” The others just chuckled and put down the money for the food, the dragon gathering it up. “Pleasure catching up with you, and if you see my pops up there tell him if he doesn’t get his scaly butt down here soon ma is gonna start tossin his stuff into the pizza oven until he does.”

The others just grinned and nodded, walking out and letting out a sigh of contentment from the meal. “Well we got to do my thing,” Newlyn stated as he looked at the other two. “What’s next?”

“Park?” Erin asked, wagging her tails in anticipation…

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\*present day\*

“This is… definitely a new development,” Erin said as the three of them stood in front of the park, all of them looking through the sunglasses they had stolen in order to hide their glowing eyes as they surveyed the empty, leaf-covered space. What the kitsune was revering to specifically however was what looked like a large monument that was in the middle of the park where a water fountain had bit, the base of which was still there as they walked over towards it. “Is that… a memorial?”

“Looks like it,” Newlyn said as they went up to the slabs of stone and found that the polished sides of the rock had letters engraved on them that he read. “A tribute to those lost in the Bal’Kar invasion of the Starpoint Research Facility.”

“So they just are acting like everyone that was up there is dead?” Erin stated as she looked at the names on the list. “Man, it looks like half the town is on the list, they really pulled a lot of people from here in order to staff the place.” When her eyes stopped at one in particular they suddenly widened. “Wait, that’s me!”

“I’m here too,” Chaos stated, running his finger along his own name before going down a few more rows. “And here’s Newlyn. According to this we’re all dead.”

“You could probably say the same about this town,” Newlyn said as he looked around. “We’re starting to get close to noon and I have yet to see a single soul outside of ourselves. Do you think they evacuated everyone after Starpoint fell?”

“Well they stuck around long enough to put up this monument,” Chaos stated. “Maybe if we look around for a bit we might find a straggler or something, someone that can tell us what happened here. Either way it’s looking less and less likely that this place is going to be ideal to start expand a nest or start a new one.”

The others nodded and reported their findings back towards Serathin, who gave an equally grim assessment of the situation but told them to keep searching if they could. If there were truly no people there then they might find some clues to why that was, or even so potential intelligence on anything the military did if they were there. There were traces of their presence the more they looked, everything from a military tent that had been left behind to obvious military tags that had been painted on several buildings and the street. Though it was hard to gauge exactly what type of operation they were attempting to do there they must have thought that the Bal’Kar were going to move on the town next and attempt to take it over, something that Serathin had anticipated and held their actions on doing.

As they walked down yet another empty street they saw a familiar sight that caused them all to experience a twitch of nostalgia, seeing Danny’s place on the corner. Like most of the buildings it was completely boarded up save for a window or two, the three deciding to go in and have a look. The dragon kept pretty meticulous notes on business sales and such so it was possible they could figure out on what day everyone decided to leave town… or when they were ordered to. When they walked inside the door made its usual dinging noise and they saw that whatever had happened had been at least a few weeks ago as they heard the leaves crunching under their feet while they walked across the dirty floor.

After they had raided the back office the three of them sat down in their usual booth and though they heard it groan slightly under their weight it held them there as they tried to figure out what to do next. “It appears that our benefactor was a bit of a celebrity,” Chaos stated as he put down the piece of paper with the draconic sabrewolf’s face on it along with a reward for anyone who spotted him. “It’s starting to look like our theory that they thought we would attack the town next might have been spot on.”

“From Danny’s records it looks like after we took Starpoint business continued on for a while longer,” Erin said as she used her forepaw to flip through the book. “Sales had definitely started to decline though and I think this M next to the orders means military, so after a while most of his food orders were to those who were stationed here. Then about a month ago it just stopped, so that was probably when this entire thing closed down.”

“Man, makes you wonder where he is now…” Newlyn speculated as he looked down at the other evidence he had gotten.

“Uh… I think he’s closer then you think…” Erin said, Newlyn looking up in confusion to see that both their eyes went slightly wide and the husky was raising his hands in the air. “Like… right behind you…”

Just as Newlyn was about to turn his head to see what was going on he heard the sound of someone pumping a shotgun and was told to stay right where he was and put his hands in the air. As he did so he looked back over at the reflection in ceiling fixture to see a familiar bronze-scaled dragon with a shotgun pointed directly at his head. “You got about three seconds to tell me how you managed to come back from the dead,” Danny demanded. “Or I’m going to make it that they’ll have to carve your name in that memorial for a second time.”

“Danny… it’s really us…” Chaos said. “Please, put down the gun and we’ll explain everything, no need for any of us getting hurt.” While Bal’Kar were immune to most guns even while in their guise form the sound of a shotgun blast was going to alert anything and everything that might still be in this town, including potentially the military. Both Erin and Chaos attempted to talk down the demanding dragon while Newlyn sat still and made sure not to move since it was him the gun was trained on in the first place.

After what felt like an eternity Danny’s resolve was starting to weaken as the gun’s barrel started to lower, until finally it pointed down to the ground. Much to their surprise as soon as the shotgun hit the floor he started to weep, the three going and consoling him as they looked at one another on what they were going to do next. While they hadn’t expected to console anyone it appeared that this dragon might have been the last living inhabitant in the town, and if they wanted to find out what was going on they were going to need him for information. Once they calmed him down enough Danny asked if they wanted to his place, the others nodding and following him down to the basement after Newlyn took the shotgun and unloaded all the shells from it before setting it aside.

“You… live down here?” Erin asked as they got to the storage area of the restaurant to find sleeping bags, a computer, a mini-fridge, and a few other things. “Why?”

“At this point I can’t really tell you myself,” Danny replied as he sat down on a couch that clearly looked like it had been dragged down there. “Ever since the whole Starpoint debacle every day has been one miserable blur. You see, once everything went down with the facility the military came rolling in here with enough firepower to take out a small country and had made all sorts of preparations.”

“I see…” Newlyn stated. “Were they the ones that evacuated the city?”

“Nah, they actually wanted people to stay,” Danny clarified. “Of course that was before they took everyone that even looked at the Starpoint facility, including my pops, and then after that everyone else just kind of fled. When they say you’re living next to a bunch of tentacle monsters you don’t tend to want to stick around... unless you’re into that sort of thing. Anyway after all the people left the military types must have thought the town wasn’t worth protecting anymore and they left too…”

“Right…” Chaos said. “I don’t think the military were attempting to protect the town… I think they may have been attempting to use is as bait to lure u…the Bal’Kar out. But my question is if everyone is gone why are you still here?”

The dragon shrugged several times and they could tell that he was going to tear up again before finally he was able to speak. “My pops isn’t a huge fan of phones and after ma left there wasn’t going to be anyone waiting for him when he got back.” The dragon looked down and sighed, putting his hands against his head. “And before you say it I know that he’s not coming back, haven’t seen a single person that they promised would come back after a few days… probably got them buried underneath the trees in that forest so they could be sure they weren’t turning into one of you guys.”

“One of… us guys?” Newlyn stated in slight confusion. “Do you know that we’re Bal’Kar?”

“Of course I know!” Danny shouted, then took a second to calm himself before continuing on. “I mean c’mon, I ain’t stupid. Three people who worked at the place suddenly show up with those glowing green peepers and I’m to think, what, you survived all that time up in the mountains and have some sort of eye condition?”

“Then why didn’t you shoot us?” Erin asked.

“They told us guns don’t work,” Danny explained. “Said that if we see one of you then we just tell them. At this point though, I really just don’t care. So go ahead and eat me or put alien larva in my belly or something, just do a friend a favor and make it quick.”

“That’s… not quite how this works,” Newlyn said. “But if you really are interested we can always show you.”

The dragon seemed interested enough that they decided to drop their guises slightly, their eyes glowing even more intensely as they began to let their Bal’Kar nature show. One of the first things they did was get out their controllers and point them in the direction of their newest prey. Under the influence of six controller tentacles they watched as their powerful lustful resonance turned his mind into mush, making him into their ball of putty as more tentacles began to emerge from their body. Newlyn and Chaos quickly shed their clothes before they ripped out of them as the transforming snow leopard took his throbbing black cock tentacle and began to push it into the subdued creature while Chaos took him from behind. For Erin she was just content to wrap her emerging tentacles around him and pull him close, the three of them infesting their old friend as bronze scales on his maw already began to darken and his horns began to lengthen and droop…

“Wait!” Erin said suddenly, the other two stopping mid thrust and pulling out as the kitsune looked around. “Do you guys see something here that may be a problem here?”

Part 3:

\*some months ago\*

“Did you guys manage to see?” Erin said excitedly but with a hushed voice as the three of them sat at their usual table in the mess hall. “Well did you? Huh?”

“If you’re talking about whatever it was that they literally cleared out the entire section of the lab between the entrance of the lab to the observation area then no,” Chaos replied as he ate his sandwich. “I wanted to leave to go to the bathroom in my lab and they nearly pointed a gun in my face as they politely told me that no one was supposed to leave until the code was deemed clear.” When he and Newlyn saw that all the tails of the Kitsune were waving about excitedly they narrowed their eyes at her. “Why, did you see what they were bringing here?”

“It’s not a what, it’s a who,” Erin replied. “I only caught a glimpse because I was with Dr. Winters working on our new payroll system for everyone having to stay inside for the duration of this project and as he was ushering me to leave I managed to catch a glimpse as they turned the corner. Now it might be too soon to say… but I think we’re working on the Bal’Kar project!”

The other two shushed her to bring her voice down and the three leaned in in order to attempt to make their conversation more private. “I actually managed to catch a glimpse myself,” Newlyn admitted. “I’m not going to say how, but it’s some hybrid creature, not sure what else besides dragon but he’s got saber teeth so I assume cat. It was hard to see where I was looking from but he’s definitely sporting the green eyes that I keeping hearing others say is a dead giveaway that they’re one of them.”

“Hold on a second,” Chaos said as he waved his hands in the air. “I have no idea what we’re talking about here, now can someone rewind and tell me what a Bal’Kar is?”

The two told him about the tentacle monsters that have been appearing in various parts of the world, and that when there’s one it usually means that there are a whole bunch because they spread like some sort of disease. Though its mostly rumor and speculation they heard that just one drop of the green fluid they excrete and start the transformation into one and that looking into their eyes means that they’ve somehow already managed to get into your mind. When they described what they looked like the husky asked how that something like that and what they were describing could be the same thing, where they went into how they can disguise themselves into their old bodies before they got turned.

“…I think someone is trying to pull your leg on this one,” Chaos said incredulously after the other two had finished their explanations. “Are you trying to tell me that this entire facility and everyone in it is here because they’re trying to research some space alien tentacle monster that can turn other people into space alien tentacle monsters?”

“It makes sense when you really think about it,” Newlyn exclaimed after taking a bite of his own food. “I’ve been hearing these guys are becoming a huge problem for the military and they’re trying to find ways to stop one of these things from taking over a major city or something. Some guy even went crazy or something because he thought they were going to be the end of the world… either way with all the security protocol drills, containment procedures, and all the secrecy around here it would make sense that we’re working on something as big as that.”

“Wow… we get to help save the world,” Chaos stated before looking at Erin. “You think you can get your friend Dr. Winters to maybe give us a little more information? I’ll admit now I’m curious about it.”

“I doubt I’m going to get much out of him,” Erin admitted. “Plus he’s been really distracted as of late, sometimes I’m talking to him and he’s got a thousand yard stare, it makes me want to just give him a hug. But I’m sure we’ll figure it out, it’s not like they’re going to let him go out for a stroll or head to town to pick up a few things… he’ll probably make a beeline right for the lake.”

“The lake?” Newlyn asked. “Why?”

“Don’t you remember?” Erin replied with a giggle. “It’s not actually a lake, it’s a reservoir.”

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“It makes perfect sense,” Erin said as the three of them walked from the pizza restaurant towards the lake in the middle of the park, the sky becoming dark. “All we have to do is contaminate the lake and then anyone who comes here and uses any of the water the town is supplied with will become a Bal’Kar themselves. Add a few spore trees to the mix and you’ve got yourself a hot spot that they’ll think is because of its proximity to Starpoint.”

“I still don’t know why we had to stop with him,” Chaos replied as he pointed back to the partially transformed bronze dragon, his eyes completely glazed over and his toes and feet already turning black as they led him with a dog collar and leash they found at a nearby store. “Four Bal’Kar can do far better corrupting the water supply then three.”

“Because four fully-formed Bal’Kar would have brought that entire pizza restaurant down on us,” Newlyn explained. “Plus a lot of bio-extract is produced during a conversion, and while we’re doing that Erin can release her spores into the forest. At this point we only have one day left until we need to head back to Starpoint and it’s going to take a lot of bio-extract to sufficiently corrupt a pool of that size.”

As they got into the park that they had only momentarily stopped at before Erin nodded to them and shifted back into her Bal’Kar form, glowing green liquid already matting down her fur before it became rubbery flesh as she went further into the forest. Already the other two could see that her spore column had started to develop on her back, causing her to be almost weighed down by it as it began to extend upwards in order to pollinate the trees. Though it wouldn’t be as effective as a fully-fledged nest being there all they could do was make it so that if anyone walked underneath the infected trees and disturbed them they would breathe in a handful and suddenly need to join the Bal’Kar.

While Erin did that the other two made their way into the waters of the reservoir, the cold water quickly rising up against their bodies as they made their way out to a small, partially submerged island that they used to use to shoot up fireworks. It was the perfect place for three lustful tentacle monsters to be in order to maximize the effectiveness of their transforming brethren without having to constantly swim. As they were getting close to the point where they could plant their feet into the soft, muddy ground they heard a loud snap and turned between them to see that the collar had broken on the dragon’s thickening neck. It wasn’t long now before he would join the hive, Newlyn and Chaos thought as they began to expand their bodies as well, and they wanted to make sure that they gave him a very warm welcome.

The two Bal’Kar gave the changing male a hug in their tentacles, watching as his partially transformed face looked up at them with a single eye already transformed into its glowing green state. With the introduction of the bio-extract in the basement of the restaurant he was already primed to go, and once Newlyn and Chaos had finished sprouting their own tentacles they took off the psychic blocks that had been slowing down the dragon’s transformation. They could already feel the lust completely consuming the dragon and as Newlyn and Chaos began to entwine around the tentacles that were growing from what was once Danny’s legs they could hear him gasping in their minds as well.

Join the hive… once more their controllers blasted the male with pure lustful suggestion, enjoying feeling the dragon wiggling both physically and mentally as Chaos took his Bal’Kar cock and pushed into the expanding rear of the other creature. Already the bronze-scaled arms, legs, and tail of the other male had turned completely back while oozing fresh extract into the waters around them. The two were following suit and soon the entire island was glowing green like it had been irradiated as Newlyn decided to take the eggs given to them and not have him hauling them down go to waste. Already Danny was completely into being a tentacle monster, so he was also going to experience the joys of holding eggs as Newlyn’s breeder joined with Chaos’s as the growing abdomen formed a hole full of seethers large enough for him to take them both.

Newlyn wasn’t the only one with eggs to give however and as his own breeder squeezed another one into him he felt it get bumped into by one traveling down Chaos’ Bal’Kar cock as well. Their lusts were starting to get the better of them, the desire to see the lake glow green with their bio-extract slowly being replaced with the need to see their new breathren get stuffed full of eggs. Both Bal’Kar wanted to get theirs in first, Newlyn and Chaos both stuffing their slurpers into the maw of the expanding dragon head in order to get more into him. With his body only paritally transformed they could see his still scaled stomach swelling like a balloon, although occasionally they could see the bumps of their eggs pushing it out. Eventually the bronze scales was replaced with black, shiny flesh as they plunged as many tentacles as they could not only into the still-growing convert but each other as well.

“So Newlyn,” Chaos sent to the other Bal’Kar mentally, their glowing eyes meeting one another’s gaze as Newlyn saw a smile on his muzzle before another egg stretched it open. “This what you expected when we came here again?”

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\*some years ago\*

“Alright everyone,” Erin said as they saw the red light on the camera blinking faster and faster. “Say, awesome trio!”

The other two did the same and the next second they heard a click. Newlyn told the other two to wait just in case and went over to the other side to see how it turned out on the digital display, then when he was sure it was good ushered the other two to do the same. “I can’t wait to get this printed and framed,” Erin said as she got up on her hind legs to see better. “I assume that you’re all going to want a copy?”

“Of course,” Newlyn replied with a smile. “Got to have something to put on my desk when I’m running the place.”

“Boss cat Newlyn,” Chaos teased as they helped Erin put the equipment away. “You think that you’re going to be running the show already?”

“Well who knows what’s going to happen when we get there,” Newlyn stated. “I’m hoping that all of us are helping to run the place once we get settled in. After that who knows where we’re going to find ourselves!”

“Well no matter what happens I want us to make a pact,” Erin said as they began to walk down the path back into the woods. “No matter where we are or how successful we’ve gotten we all need to come here and have another picnic, even if we’re still in the same facility. I want another picture of us too.”

“I think I can manage that as long as they don’t send one of us up into space or to Antarctica or something,” Chaos said with a grin. “I don’t think they have a lot of research facilities on the moon though that only require six months of training, so I think we’ll be fine.”

‘I’m serious though Chaos,” Erin replied. “Right here, like two years from now.”

“Just tell them you’re taking the space shuttle out to get washed,” Newlyn stated, the others laughing as well.

“Sounds like I’m locked in now,” Chaos said, taking one last look out over the crystal blue waters before they started walking through the woods. “So what do you think we’re going to find when we come back here in a few years? Besides all of us running Starpoint.”

“Well…” Newlyn said. “The town is probably going to be thriving with all the people that are going to be running the facility, not to mention all those fat government checks that they’re going to be handing out to everyone. Maybe they’ll even turn the place into a full-blown city, could you imagine coming back here in two years to find them building skyscrapers or something like that?”

‘I hope now,” Erin replied as she shook her head. “They’ll probably get rid of the park or something then, we’ll come back and there’s some juice place or yoga studio right where we’re supposed to be having our picnic.”

“The cost of change I’m afraid,” the snow leopard stated with a chuckle. “You never know what’s going to happen when you start shifting things around. All I really hope for is that we can find the time out of our busy schedules to actually come out here and relax…”

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\*present day\*

“You know, I’m really glad that we took some time to do this,” Newlyn said as they sat back on the blanket they found in an abandoned house, the three of them snacking on whatever foods they could find as he used one of his tentacles to hold the glass that contained his beverage. “I know that this probably isn’t exactly the way we thought our next picnic was going to go but we certainly made the most of it.”

The others nodded in agreement, watching the sun set over the mountains just like they had done before. It taken almost the entire day to produce enough bio-extract to taint the otherwise pure waters and then after that they went on a hunt for picnic supplies, trying to scavenge what they could from various stores and houses. Fortunately for them a lot of people seemed to have left in a hurry and the gear they had for their latest outing was much fancier then what they had used for the first one. The view had also changed significantly for them from the last time, as the day turned to night and the skies grew darker the streetlights failed to flicker to life and the only light came from the slight green glow that came from the waters themselves.

Soon the three of them were going to make the trek through the woods and up the mountain to wait for the second satellite shutdown. Once they left their newest Bal’Kar Danny would stay behind and put in a call that he was still living in the town and that he had started to feel very strange, then hang up before they could get a decent trace on them. Then he would come up to the Starpoint facility the day after they got back, making it look like some random dragon got infected merely by the environment and went up to join the hive without any aid whatsoever. It would get caught by the spy satellite and likely the next month or so this place will be swarming with military trying to figure out just how a hive of Bal’Kar up in the mountains managed to contaminate a natural reservoir that didn’t even get fed by any streams coming from that area.

After that… they were just going to have to see what happened and how much the military was going to respond to such a thing. It was possible this could backfire and they might see increased pressure on the hive, but they know that sending any sort of troops or weapons into such a heavily fortified area was just going to end poorly for them. That meant that they would likely study the area that they contaminated and spin their wheels for a few months trying to figure out how they managed to corrupt such a large area without even touching it.

“If I may propose a toast,” Newlyn said as he raised his glass, the others doing the same as their controllers looked at one another. “To the best friends that a snow leopard Bal’Kar could ever have. Whether it’s getting the same job or becoming part of a hive of tentacle monsters I’m glad that I was able to do it all with you guys.”

“Awwww,” Erin said, her slightly mutated tails flipping about and spreading extract all over the area. “That’s so sweet.” Suddenly the corrupted kitsune jumped up, her eyes widened as she looked around the area while the others looked at her in question. “I almost forgot, if we don’t do it now then we’re not going to get another chance!”

“Another chance?” Chaos asked before the two watched her go into the bushes and pull out a familiar blue bag. “Wait… you can’t possibly mean.”

“Yep, it’s picture time!” Erin said happily, this time using her tentacles to open the bag and set up the camera while also corralling the others to get behind her to get in position. “I wanted to do it while the sun was in the same general position as before, you know, just to capture the change in time. Since we have to start hiking through the woods pretty much the second we leave here I knew that we weren’t going to be able to come back.”

“I’m not sure that we’re going to be able to fit three Bal’Kar here,” Newlyn stated. “We had to transform almost completely back to our guise states just so we could have the picnic without our tentacles dangling over the edge or accidently falling off.”

“Then we’ll just do it in our guise forms,” Erin replied. “Or maybe we should take one with our controller tentacles out?”

Eventually Newlyn and Chaos reminded the other Bal’Kar that she had a digital camera and that they could take as many pictures as they wanted… as long as they did it before the light failed them completely. The three of them quickly took one of themselves while in their guise forms, setting up the picture before Newlyn arched one of his controller tentacles over to make sure the picture looked good before he set off the self-timer with it. Once they were done with that they did a few more in various states of being a Bal’Kar, ending with one in traditional punk-rocker poses with their tongues having been turned into bright green slurpers. Once they were finished the three went over and took a look, smiling at one another when they saw themselves on the screen.

“Oh shoot,” Erin said suddenly. “I just realized that I have no way to print these.”

The others chuckled at that as they packed away the equipment while the kitsune looked at the ground with a flustered look on her face. “I’m sure we can find someone at the Starpoint facility that knows how we can print these out as well as the equipment to do so,” Newlyn explained. “A facility like that probably has all sorts of supplies that we haven’t looked into yet because, well, we really didn’t need them.”

“Probably,” Chaos chimed in. “I would be more concerned with how you’re going to get those framed.”

The three continued to laugh and talk as they walked under the spore-laden trees, hitting up a few stores for some essential supplies before they left the town. While none of them were too keen on having to essentially walk up a mountain they didn’t have a choice, the scope of the spy satellite tracking them made sure to cover all the roads in case they attempted to escape or, for some reason, someone tried to get to them. That made them worry a little bit about Danny, whom was back at the restaurant packing a few of his own things just in case they take his call a little too seriously, but when they talked to Serathin about it he reassured them that by the time spy satellite relayed the new Bal’Kar’s position it will be too late for them to assemble some sort of strike team.

Eventually the three made it through the woods and to the base of the mountain, sighing as they looked all the way up at the peak they were supposed to get through as night continued to loom over them. “Are we sure that there’s no other way that we can just… call a rideshare or something?” Chaos said, the others smirking as they began to walk their way up the rocky ground. “I mean I would pay for it if Bal’Kar used money… I suppose we could just convert the driver.”

“I’m sure a car could handle four Bal’Kar riding in it,” Erin said as they walked up the trail. “First bump we’d hit would probably break four axels.”

“My money would be on the car not even moving,” Newlyn chimed in. “Plus we would have to go up the hill… nah, would probably make it about ten feet before we would have to take our tentacles out and start pushing it as we went.”

All three of them chuckled as they imagined a bunch of Bal’Kar crammed into a car with their tentacles outside of the windows, leaving a trail of oil and bio-extract as they attempted to get up the mountain. That eventually led into other conversation that helped pass the time while they made their way up. Had anyone been looking and saw three creatures, two of which in pants and shirts, climbing the way they were they probably would have called someone, but thanks to their physiology they hardly felt anything while they made their way up. That didn’t stop them from wishing that they could turn into their true forms and just scuttle their way up the mountain to make it faster, though even if they did that they would have to wait anyway until the window opened in the satellite maintenance cycle.

The hike up the mountain took about as long as they thought it would, eventually the three trudging through the snow as the sun climbed over them in the sky before eventually sinking to the other side of them. When they got above the tree line they could see the town from where they were, a shell of its former self with a bit of Bal’Kar bred into it. They mentally reached out to Danny while they were up there and found that he was fine, leaving a few extra gifts for anyone that might happen to step foot inside his restaurant. He was always one to be hospitable, they thought to themselves as they continued their ascent.

Though it wasn’t nearly as vital as it would be to anyone else who would be up there the three could sense that the air was starting to get thin as they reached the summit, crystals forming on their fur from the snow blowing around them. The sun was had nearly begun to set, though from this high up they were going to stay in the light for far longer as they looked around the rather flat area. When they were about to move forward they suddenly got a warning from Serathin to stay were they were, the lip that they were on was just outside the scope of the spy satellite and if they moved any further they might get picked up by it. With all the effort that they put into making sure that his presence in their security system remained unseen the three backtracked a bit and found some rocks to settle on while they waited for the signal.

“We should have brought up snowboards or something,” Chaos said as he looked down the side of the mountain. “We could easily make Starpoint within the two or three minutes if we were boarding our way down there.”

“I can just imagine sliding up to the entrance all cool and slick,” Newlyn replied, crossing his arms as a particularly strong gust of wind blew past them. “I have to say though you could do worse for a ski spot, except it’s a little rocky down there at the end. Of course we’re Bal’Kar, I don’t think we really get into ski accidents.”

“I hope not,” Erin chimed in. “That would be a lot of casting material if we broke all our tentacles falling down a mountain.” She looked up with the others as the stars began to come out, the moon poking up just as the last rays of the sun were failing. “You know… since we’re probably not going to be able to get back to town anymore to picnic in our usual spot, why not celebrate it here?”

The other two looked at each other, then around at the view. “I suppose if you didn’t mind the wind it would be rather idyllic,” Chaos stated. “I wonder what our eyes in the sky would think of three Bal’Kar on top of a mountain having a picnic together.”

The others chuckled and started to make plans until they were interrupted by Serathin telling them it was time to go. One by one the three ran over the summit of the mountain and started sliding down the other side. They knew they would get there in plenty of time, the three of them growing out their tentacles in order to catch themselves and skitter down the mountain towards the facility, their home…

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Newlyn sat there in front of his desk, holding the famed picture of him and his three friends on that fateful day over the lake. It had been a while since he had gone down there with them, circumstances preventing them from being able to make the trip. As he stared at the three smiling faces he wondered if what they thought was the end of an era really was a beginning? Some could say that they started a whole new chapter there that day, though once could say that about any snapshot moment. Even though sometimes it was hard to tell if things were at the start, in the middle, or even at the end the one thing he knew that as long as he had friends by his side who cared about him no matter what it didn’t really matter at what page the story was at.

“Hey Newlyn,” a voice said, the snow leopard looking up to see Erin and Chaos standing there with big grins on their faces. “Guess what? There’s cake down in the break room! Everyone tried to get their slimy hands on a piece but we managed to grab a slice for each of us and we thought about hanging down in the pool area, you want in?”

“You know it,” Newlyn replied, a smile on his own muzzle as he took the picture and was about to set it back on the desk when Erin walked over and looked at it herself.

“Oh man, down by the lake!” she exclaimed, her tails wagging around as Chaos came up behind her and looked at it as well. “Man how time flies, we were so young…”

The other two chuckled at that and Newlyn put the picture away for safekeeping before joining the other two in heading down to the mess hall. “You know they say that no one truly knows when they’ve taken their last picture together with someone,” Erin said matter-of-factly. “That random shot with the two of your smiling could be the last moment that you’ll ever be with them.”

“That’s pretty deep,” Chaos said.

“Yeah, I think I read it in a fortune cookie once,” Erin replied with a grin as she looked up at Newlyn. “So out of curiosity what do you think that picture was?”

“I think…” Newlyn started to say, taking a deep breath before letting it out and grinning. “I think that it doesn’t matter.” The other two groaned and stuck their tongue out at them. “What, does it really matter when that photo was taken? We’re friends from beginning to end.”