There was an excitement in the air as the people in the megacity waited eagerly for the announcement that had been teased for nearly a year and a half. It had originally started with a single matrix post from a megacorporation called KatazCorp where the founder himself had gotten on the screen and, in a thirty-second video, mentioned that something was about to be released the likes of which no one had ever seen before. Since this particular company had become the forefront of entertainment, especially with the use of matrix integration equipment that allowed a user to become fully integrated with their games to touch, smell, and even taste what was going on in the digital world, it was no surprise that the amount of buzz generated was immediate and intense. That was only the start of it; through the rest of the year the company continued to keep teasing and mentioning things about this grand new product in order to keep it in the mind of the public.

Finally it had gotten down to the final hours before the promotional launch, and even though the company itself hadn’t organized anything there were still parties that were going on in streets both real and virtual. What had this pioneer of the entertainment industry come up with that would warrant such a long teaser? People had been speculating for months and soon it would be time to see exactly what it was. There was even the show of the countdown timer in the big electronic billboards on the streets where people had come to gather.

Twenty minutes… the uproar of the crowd and the festive nature was reaching a fevered pitch and all manner of news organizations were out covering the spectacle. Some people even had on KatazCorp products to show their support, including the full body suits that had come out just three years prior. Since one also needed a chair and a fair bit of hardware to connect onto the Matrix Network it was purely for show, but people were far to excited to even care. It was even bigger than the New Year’s Party that had happened only months before as everyone watched the minutes continue to tick away.

Ten minutes, all manner of traffic both public and private had stopped at this point in order to see what was going to happen. It was unlike anything that anyone had ever seen before, and even though it was almost midnight people were lining up at stores that carried similar merchandise in the hopes that they would sell whatever it was right away. The Matrix Video Networks were absolutely flooded with people streaming and posting videos of the hype, even people who weren’t interested in what the product was had gone out just to enjoy the parties that were happening.

One minute to go… the crowd suddenly went from loud and boisterous to completely dead quiet as they watched the screens. The previous announcement from the megacorporation said that they would be posting the announcement on the same video channel that the countdown was on, so there was little need for anyone to switch over to anything. People had started to quietly count down as they watched the numbers do the same. Ten… nine… eight… the only sounds that came from the people in the streets were those numbers until they finally hit the zero mark.

The second that there were zeroes across the board the screen went to completely black, then showed the familiar logo of a skunk holding a video game controller. A loud series of cheers went up at the reveal, but then once more quickly went quiet as the screens faded to black once more. But that wasn’t the only thing that went dark… before the next image came up on the billboards and on screens across the city the entire area was plunged completely into darkness. Not just the screens themselves but streetlights, building lights, the neon street signs, and everything else running on electricity went completely dead in an unprecedented way.

The rustling of the crowd turned from anticipation to fear as people began to panic; with even the security lights that were still on via battery power there was mostly darkness that surrounded everyone both inside and out. Not only that but those who had been in the Matrix at the time were suddenly and forcibly booted out, causing some to experience sudden disconnection sickness as they were brought back into real life without the appropriate cooldown time. As people blearily got their bearings in their apartments and homes others began to use the flashlights on their commlinks, taking the wrist mounted device and holding it up so that people could at least see where they were going. As people did that however they also noticed something else extremely disconcerting; not only had the power gone completely out in the entire city but it had also knocked out connections to the entire City Network and the normally infallible Global Matrix Network.

It only lasted for about ten minutes however; just as people were starting to figure out what they were going to do next or where they were going to go the lights above and all around them flickered back to life. With the city streets once more illuminated in the constant and reassuring glow of neon and halogen the police, whom had already been dispatched as crowd control earlier and had been keeping the peace, told people to clear the streets and go back to their homes while everything was being sorted out. As everyone recovered from their temporary loss of connection however one thing remained on everyone’s minds as they looked up at the still black screens.

What had been the announcement that KatazCorp was going to make, and what were they going to do about the interruption?

It was nearly two days before the company made a full statement saying that their announcement had been sabotaged by rival corporations, the fox spokesperson making a full statement that they would be working closely with officials to make sure that this act of corporate terrorism would not be abided by. Until then they would keep the reveal secret until the threat had passed, much to the chagrin of the public. More waiting… already people had been super amped by the teasers leading up to it and while some were even more curious on what it was after the fact others were completely turned off by the notion. Nevertheless the corporation had gone into lockdown mode and no one, not even the press, was getting any answers until this investigation was concluded.

This led to a lot of inquiries, and when official channels were blocked people would either go to rumors on the Matrix or try and find an unofficial means to get the information they wanted. One of those brokers of knowledge worked in a small pawn shop in Cerberus Alley, so named due to the fact that the street broke into three alleys that all ended up in dead ends. In one of those branches a ferret had set up a place to sell his wares; with jewelry, electronics, and other second hand goods in the front and his network of informants running in the back. If someone needed anything in the realm of secrets the ferret had set himself up as one of the few that could reliably get it for them.

But much to the pawn shop owner’s frustration he was finding himself coming up with the same information that everyone else was, which was nothing. “Hey Xander,” the ferret called out as he continued to type, his eyes scanning each of the six floating monitors that showed him any updates from people that he had tapped to go out and get him information. “Did the Marlowe Twins come in yet with their search on employees in KatazCorp to see if any of them would talk?”

“Not yet Alkali,” the voice on the other side of the door replied. “Where do you want these pinball machines anyway? I’m tired of moving them around and the guy who said he was coming in for them still hasn’t shown up.”

“Just put them in the corner,” Alkali replied as he sat back, pouring himself a glass of synthetic tequila and rubbing it between his hands. He flinched momentarily as there was the loud sound of scraping in the storage room, followed by several thuds and the sound of the electronic games activating. “You’re keeping them in one piece, right?”

There was silence for a few seconds before the door opened, the blue-scaled dragon shaking his head as he came in. “I don’t know why you even bother,” Xander replied, flexing his cybernetic arm while his real one closed the door behind him. “This isn’t even your real business, and yet you keep trying to wheel and deal for all this junk. If I didn’t know any better I would assume you were a pack rat instead of a ferret.”

“Says the dragon,” Alkali shot back as he looked away from the cyborg creature and back to his screen that he had been working on. “Plus I’ve already explained to you that I have to at least try and make this look like a legitimate business, otherwise it starts to get pretty obvious that we’re just laundering credits through it. Now why don’t you go and see if the Marlowe twins have gotten anywhere instead of just polishing your metal bits.”

The dragon rolled his eyes, both of which were actually LED screens that had been implanted in his skull and went up towards the desk where the ferret sat. “Someone is grumpy today,” Xander stated simply as he put his hand against the leather chair and scanned the screens himself. “I take it your latest data mining search isn’t going very well?”

“More like absolutely terrible,” the ferret replied, sipping his tequila while typing on the computer with one hand to bring up the empty e-mail screens. “I’ve pretty much reached out to everyone that would listen and asked about this KatazCorp business, but so far the only responses I’ve gotten are either that they won’t touch it with a ten-foot pole or they’ve come up completely dry themselves. I swear at this point I’m going to have to break into the building myself just to try and see what this revolutionary new product is.”

“I would say that people should just wait but I know that patience isn’t the strong suit of those on the Matrix,” Xander replied with a wink. “Anyway… I’ll go see what the Marlowe brothers have found, you just try and take a break before this thing makes you go crazy. When I come back maybe I’ll even have you help polish my metal bits to relax.”

The ferret just chuckled at that and watched the dragon leave, then went back to drinking his drink and looking at his monitors. He had never come up empty like this before and it was starting to make him wonder if he was going to have to look elsewhere… possibly even go into the Full Immersion Resonance Relays they had on the Matrix to try and talk to a few people. Normally he didn’t even like to think of going on there; not only did he have a basic mistrust of KatazCorp but there was also the fact that he would be completely plugged in and constantly being scanned by a machine that was owned by them. He didn’t even like it when Xander used them, though that hadn’t stopped the dragon from trying them out in Sim Dens.

Just as he was about to take the dragon’s advice and go on a break one of his screens suddenly went black, quickly followed by another one and another until soon all of them had completely gone out. His first instinct was that his network was being penetrated and went for the kill switch that would not only disconnect his rig but also fry all the drives on it, but just as he reached over an icon appeared that took up all six in an almost seamless picture of a skunk head. “I know what you are looking for Alkali,” a voice said over his speakers. “If you really want to find out what KatazCorp is hiding you need to find me… but be careful, others have noticed you as well and they don’t take people nosing around in their business very well.”

In the next second his computer shut down, then completely rebooted itself. Alkali sat there in a stunned silence as he watched his monitors once more come back on-line with all the windows he had opened before still up and running. On one of his secure Matrix Mail addresses however he noticed that he had a new message from a sender that he didn’t recognize. While that itself wasn’t too strange, the company that he went through took great lengths to protect the anonymity of their clients, the fact that the subject line was merely that same skunk face he had just seen was extremely suspicious. While the ferret’s curious side wanted to open it right then and there, he knew that such a thing wasn’t very smart and instead downloaded the e-mail along with the respective attachment onto his computer before copying it to a blackbox datadrive that he put in his pocket.

Alkali decided that was enough for the day and completely shut down his entire computer system, then unplugged everything from itself just in case. He would deal with scrubbing his system later, the ferret thought to himself as he took the bottle of tequila and took a drink from it directly, since for the first time in the last week since the incident took place he might finally have a lead on what was happening with KatazCorp. As for the cryptic message and threat against him he took it in stride; he wouldn’t be good at his job if he didn’t have people that wanted to know who he was even if he never directly stole the information he brokered in. Once the dragon got back, Xander informing the ferret that The Marlowe Twins came up empty as well, he filled him in on what had just happened along with the plan on where they were going to do next.

In Cerberus Alley on a different tine of the split street there was another store, this one advertising that it could fix computer components and help restore lost files. In reality it was a fence for stolen computer goods run by a demon named Draggor, someone who was highly regarded for his ability to wipe the digital fingerprints and other security measures off of sensitive equipment before it was sold to the highest bidder as well as extract high-value data from hardware without getting caught. For Alkali however he was the one he went to in order to make sure that anything of a suspicious digital nature was inspected so it didn’t somehow explode in his computer. As the two of them walked into the shop they found the demon in his usual spot, sitting up front behind the counter while working on some piece of technology that someone had brought in.

“Looking good there Draggor,” Alkali commented, bringing Draggor’s attention away from what he was working on to look up at him with those solid black eyes. “What’s the problem with that, is it overheating too much?”

Overheating was the code word that they used in order to deal with stolen merchandise of an electronic nature, the demon shaking his head and putting down the auto screwdriver he was using. “No, this one is actually broken,” he stated. “I swear this guy brings in his FIRR rig at least once a month in order to be repaired. I’m not sure what he’s doing with it and a big part of me doesn’t want to know… but yeah, I could use a break and I’m sure you’re not here for a chat.”

“Of course not,” Alkali replied as he reached into his pocket and pulled out the datadrive with the e-mail on it. “I might have gotten a love letter from someone while working on getting information for that KatazCorp job and I need someone with your delicate touch to open it just in case.”

Draggor nodded and opened his hand, the ferret tossing it to him before he motioned with his head to follow him to the back of the shop. Aside from being a decent hardware specialist the demon was also a hacker of some repute, and after they went through the back of his shop and down the stairs into the basement of the building he led them to a place that was certainly made for it. The entire level had been turned into a giant makeshift faraday cage with scanners and cameras hooked to a hardwired internal security network, which meant that the only bugs getting into his place were the many-legged kind as he went over to the servers that had been set up along one of the walls. One of them the demon had explained to Alkali was completely black boxed, which meant that if there was anything nasty inside all it would do is ruin one of his cheaper servers as he plugged in the datadrive and went to his screen to open it.

“This one better not make my server explode again,” Draggor commented as he began to type in various commands with such speed that even Xander’s augmented eyes had trouble keeping up. “If it does, I’m going to charge you double for the repairs.”

“You know I’m good for it,” Alkali replied as he watched keenly. “Plus I think if this person really wanted to hurt me he would have let the police in on my location without me knowing, or caused my computer to explode while he was in my system. Call it a gut feeling, but I think this person is genuinely reaching out to me for some reason.”

The demon just shook his head and continued to work, eventually opening the file while surrounding it with programs to make sure that he could catch anything that it tried to do. But as the file loaded up and began to display it looked like… just a video file. Draggor continued to remain suspicious and scanned for anything and everything he could think of, but there was just nothing there that warranted any red flags going up. When they looked at one another they all just shrugged and gave looks of confusion before he finally decided to click on the file itself to open it.

As the video file loaded up all three of them looked over at the server that they had it plugged into and both Alkali and Xander instinctively leaned a step or two away for it as they watched the download bar quickly complete, then open the file itself. The video started… and began to play what appeared to be an old cartoon that featured a skunk running around and just doing silly cartoon stuff. It seemed to only last for a minute or two and then shut off, leaving a black window that they all just stared at. When that appeared to be it Draggor clicked on it again, only to find the exact same thing happening.

“I… don’t get it,” Draggor said finally after playing it for a third time. “Someone hacked into your computer, hijacked your system to give you a message, then sent you a file with a cartoon on it?”

“Maybe it’s some sort of clue,” Xander stated. “You know, some of that follow the breadcrumb stuff that you see in movies all the time. Alkali said that the person wants us to find him and that there might be others looking as well, this is probably just something they thought of to keep him safe.”

“Yeah, but usually there is some connection to the sender in order for the clue to actually work,” the demon explained, looking over at Alkali. “So unless there’s some sort of secret meaning that the ferret gleaned out of it I think you might be getting punked.”

Alkali found himself just taking off his top hat and scratching his head, his mind trying to think of anything that he had seen or done that would possibly correlate to the old cartoon they had just watched. Other than the skunk, which was loosely similar to the icon that he had seen on his screens as well as the e-mail, there was nothing there that would have given him a direction to find this person. Everything about the cartoon clip was incredibly vague and there were no connections to anything in the city or in his personal life that would tell him where to go next. Draggor suggested that perhaps there was more information on his personal commuter system and to open the original file there, the demon grabbing a nearby backpack and augmented wrist computer before the three of them went back to the pawn shop to have a look.

Just as they were walking down the street however Alkali suddenly felt his stomach rumble and realized that up until that point the only thing he had ingested for the last few hours was synthetic alcohol. When he went to the others about possibly getting lunch first they stated they could also eat and went over to a local ramen place that was a few streets down. While it was an establishment that they hadn’t visited before all three of them had a hankering for noodles, and it was the only one in the area that served such. The three of them went inside and sat down in a booth near the back while looking at the menu, and after the waiter left once he had taken their orders they discussed in hushed tones what it could possibly be that this digital mystery skunk wanted in order to reach out to Alkali with an almost impossibly cryptic message.

As the three bounced their ideas off of one another they eventually got their food and ate it while they continued to speculate, talking all the way up until they got their checks. When they did so they also had the usual fortune cookie for each person on top of it, Alkali grabbing and opening his while the others did the same with theirs. “You will find a new friend today,” the ferret read out loud while he picked his teeth with a toothpick. “He is closer than you think.”

“Well that’s a nice fortune,” Xander said before looking down at his. “Mine says that I will find new opportunities to better myself in the near future, and to always keep my eyes open for signs to point the way. Maybe we’ll meet that new friend of yours there Alkali.”

The two chuckled at that and turned to Draggor, their jovial attitudes deflating slightly when they saw the look of confusion and concern on the demon’s face. “You alright there Draggor?” Alkali asked. “What does yours say?”

“Four men armed with guns are about to run into the restaurant to kill you and your friends,” the demon said, looking up. “You have five seconds to start moving to the kitchen and through the back door.”

The three just looked at the fortune cookie, then turned their heads towards the front door that faced the streets. Almost immediately they saw several men in suits walk past the wide window with the restaurant’s name on it, one of them already holding some sort of pistol to his side. It was clear even without the cookie what these men intended to do and as they scrambled out of the booth and towards the back door they heard the front one suddenly get kicked open. They heard someone shout and just as Alkali and the others ducked their heads down the carved statue of a monkey exploded over their heads from the shotgun round that had just been fired into it.

Screams of panic rose up from the restaurant as they got behind the counter and into the kitchen, stumbling across the greasy tiled floor and pushing aside the chefs that were working back there. As Xander poked his head up to see where the hitmen were a bullet whizzed inches away from his skull and hit the electronic work board behind them, causing it to crack and spark. As he ducked his head back down he knew that he had to somehow stall them, even with the lead they had gotten the men could just gun them down the second they had a clear shot in the back alley. His eyes scanned the room before they landed on a giant wok that contained the ramen base for the restaurant, the dragon yelling at the chefs to get away from the kitchen door as he lingered behind and waited for it to open.

The second that one of the men in the suits kicked open that door and aimed his gun he paused when he saw Xander holding the giant boiling wok of ramen over his head with his cybernetic arm. “Order up!” he shouted as he threw the entire thing at them, hearing them cry out in pain as the scalding hot liquid completely drenched them. As they tried to somehow get the scalding noodle soup off of them they shot at the dragon in a blind fury, bullets hitting the walls and equipment as Xander ran out of the back door and into the alley.

There he suddenly found the other two standing only a few feet away from the back door, and before he could ask them why they weren’t running the dragon saw what had prevented them from doing so. “You think you could just try and get away with digging into KatazCorp business?” the lemur said as he held an automatic rifle leveled straight at them. “I’m afraid you’ve all had your last meal-“

There was a loud clang and suddenly the thug went rigid for a second before he fell to the ground with the weapon clattering to the concrete a foot away from him, revealing the grinning creature holding a fully-extended collapsible baton. “Some people are just not equipped to quip,” the draconic sabrewolf said as he tapped the baton against the wall and put the folded back weapon into his pocket. “Hey guys, what’s up?”

Chapter 2:

After about ten minutes the group had managed to loop their way around from the streets near Cerberus Alley to a local subway system, then rode it along until they were in an entirely different section of town. Alkali, Xander, and Draggor had wanted to ask the interloper where exactly they were leading him and why he intervened in the first place, but the hybrid just put a finger to his lips and told them to wait. After about an hour they finally walked off the subway and through an old industrial district, eventually coming into a building that appeared to be an old warehouse where the draconic sabrewolf lead them in.

Just as they got to an old freight elevator the dragon stopped as the draconic sabrewolf hopped in and motioned for them to do the same. “Hold on,” Xander said, stopping the other two from following as well. “I don’t know about you guys, but I think it’s time that we get some answers before we follow our new friend on his elevator that could lead to his murder loft or whatever.”

“New friend…” Alkali repeated, taking out the fortune that he had hastily stuck in his pocket when the shooting started and looking at it before glancing back up at the hybrid. “Are you the one that put this in my cookie? Did you send me the message with the skunk cartoon?”

To his surprise the sabretooth creature just shook his head. “No, I just happened to be working in the area and was getting lunch at the same noodle spot you guys were at.” The hybrid explained as he held up a plastic bag that until that moment they didn’t even realize he was holding onto. “They possibly have the best shrimp lo mien in the entire city… but in any case, when I saw that there was about to be a hit carried out by four members of the KatazCorp security forces I knew that this was something way more interesting then what I was doing. Then you guys just… kind of followed me back to my place, which honestly I wasn’t really expecting you to do since we had just met even after I cracked the skull of the security guy that tried to kill you.”

Though they had more questions they once more were shushed and told to wait until they got to a safe place to talk, pointing up the elevator shaft that he was intending them to ascend. Xander looked wearily at the other two but Draggor had already gotten onto the elevator with Alkali not too far behind, and when the ferret stepped inside the dragon sighed and decided to do the same. Once everyone was on board the elevator began to move of its own accord and bring them up to the top part of the warehouse. The three looked at one another in concern but tried to remain calm as they were brought to an unknown place by a stranger.

Once they arrived they found the wide open space rather… underwhelming. It was clear that someone was living there and that someone had set up one section of the space with a bed and kitchen, but other then that there were only a few computers that were lying about only connected to power systems with no screens or input devices. “So… this is where you live,” Draggor said as he looked around while nonchalantly using his mobile rig that he carried in his backpack in order to try and scan for threats. “It’s… definitely very roomy.”

“I really enjoy it because of the view of the bay and the solitude it affords me,” the hybrid said before looking straight back at the demon. “You also can stop your scans, I’ve set this place up to be shielded from the Matrix… and with it being so far out in the boonies you’re not going to find much of a signal here in the first place.”

Alkali and Xander looked at the demon and were surprised at the shocked look on his face. “How did you…” Draggor trailed off when he saw the creature smirk, his vibrant green eyes flashing slightly before he went over to the table and set his food down on top of it. “Wait a second, you’re a technomancer, aren’t you?”

“A technomancer?” Xander asked.

“Someone that can access computers without the need for any of the peripherals that we need to operate them,” Draggor explained, looking around. “That explains the shielding, I’ve heard your kind can get overwhelmed if constantly connected to the Matrix.”

“Indeed we can,” the technomancer replied as he sat down. “My name is Serathin by the way, introductions being in order while you’re standing in my house.”

The others did the same with their names, followed by the story of everything that had happened from Alkali’s investigation into the KatazCorp outage all the way up to the noodle store. When they got to the part where they started to get shot at the hybrid chimed in that he had just walked out with his food order when he saw the four walk in; his techno senses pinged not only weapon tags but also corporate ID’s on their matrix signatures… along with a fifth that was heading to the back alley. “I guess it was lucky that you like their lo mien, otherwise we’d probably be three more bodies found on the news that died of mysterious circumstances.” Alkali said as he continued to explore the place. “But that still doesn’t explain the fortune cookie, how did someone know that those thugs were coming and that you were there to help?”

“The world works in mysterious ways,” Serathin replied with a shrug before looking back at Draggor. “I’m more curious though in this file that you say is just an old cartoon video, do you mind if I try and take a look at it?” The demon nodded and pulled the datadrive out of his pocket and slid it over to Serathin, who palmed it and looked it over before frowning slightly. “Black boxed… smart move for something that was so potentially sensitive, but that means that I can’t access it with my powers either without extracting the file from it.”

“So, just plug it in… to…” Xander started to say before looking around. “Any of these computers I guess?”

“I’d rather not expose my little nest here by opening a potentially hazardous file,” Serathin said as he took the datadrive and put it into his pocket. “It’s fine though, I actually know someone that runs a sim den that can help us decipher this data and provide us a place where we can more intimately interact with it. If we’re lucky we can get there right as it opens and avoid the rush, both of people wanting to get in some quality FIRR time and also for those who want to kill you.”

The three shared a look of concern as they realized this new impromptu member of their team was right, it wouldn’t be like a megacorp to just send one hit squad and then call it quits after it failed. In fact it would likely be quite the opposite; and though Serathin had mentioned that he had covered their tracks by scrubbing out their presence in any security footage as they traveled the company had many other resources to try and track them down. Draggor mentioned that most data devices that people played on while they had their daily commute or walked along the streets were registered KatazCorp devices, and almost all of them had cameras in some capacity. Though this issue had already been brought up the founder was quick to say that they would never breach confidential data of their users… which people didn’t believe in the slightest but was enough to shut down any official investigation.

For the moment though they were safe, with the isolated location and the technomancer’s shielding they were officially off-grid for the moment and it would make tracking them hard. Since it was still someone early in the evening Serathin suggested that they take a breather and get a game plan for what they were about to do, especially now that they were actively on KatazCorp’s radar. While Draggor discussed chatted privately with the technomancer about his abilities Xander and Alkali moved to another corner of the loft in order to have a private conversation of their own. “I still don’t like this one bit,” the cybernetically-enhanced dragon said to the ferret. “You get contacted by a shady individual who leaves you an innocuous e-mail, only to be shot at less then an hour later and be swept away by another equally shady individual who is about to take us to a third even more shady individual?”

“Well when you put it that way,” Alkali said before sighing and taking a drink from a flask he fished out of his inner jacket pocket. “I don’t know what we’ve stumbled on here but this train has unfortunately left the station and we’re all on it. We either see it all the way to the end or we start running, and with KatazCorp being a global empire it’s hard to think of places where we could go that they won’t find us somehow.”

“I think I could find a place where I can protect you,” Xander said with a smirk before it fell away, looking back over at Draggor and Serathin. “I can’t do that however if the knife that stabs you comes from behind. We need to consider them to be wild cards until we find out more of what’s happening.”

“Them?” Alkali replied in slight shock. “Why are you including Draggor in this? He’s been friends with us ever since we moved into Cerberus Alley.”

“He’s also a skilled hacker and knows his way around a computer,” Xander stated simply, shaking his head slightly when the ferret continued to look at him. “I’m just saying that we keep an eye on him, alright? Who knows what we’re caught up in, or what’s at stake…”

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A few hours later the sun had completely set and the group decided that it was time to go out and try to reach the Sim Den that Serathin had described. The draconic sabrewolf instructed to keep close to him at all times to make sure that he could make their presence unknown by surveillance, and when Draggor mentioned the fact that they would be surrounded by cameras other than active surveillance the technomancer explained he couldn’t possibly handle every single one and they would just have to hope that KatazCorp hadn’t thought of doing that yet. While that didn’t instill a lot of confidence in the others all they could do was keep their eyes out as they left the old industrial district and headed back into the city proper.

Though everyone tried to remain calm it was clear from the moment they walked into the subway station of the megacity that they were all on edge. They became hyperaware of all those playing portable game stations and on their commlinks while others took active video calls. All of them potentially had someone behind their cameras watching, waiting for them to poke their heads out in order to send the death squads after them. As they rode the subway however it appeared that their presence had gone unnoticed for the time being, or at least they weren’t being attacked as they got out of the subway and moved up the platform.

Just before they went up to the street level however Draggor suddenly reached out and grabbed Serathin by the arm, stopping him and the rest of the group as he caused the hybrid to spin around. “Are you kidding me?” he hissed, the demon pointing up to the street sign display on the wall. “I know where this is, do you really think it’s smart bringing us here?”

“Wait, what?” Alkali asked while Xander quickly ushered everyone to the side to avoid being in the middle of all the foot traffic. “What’s going on Draggor?”

“I forgot you guys just moved here,” the demon said as he continued his grip on Serathin’s arm. “This is the Paradise Falls District, also known as the main entertainment hub for the city. We may as well be walking into KatazCorp’s home office!”

Both Alkali and Xander looked at Serathin as he wrestled his arm away from Draggor and rubbed it. “Is that true?” the ferret asked nervously. “Is your friend really here?”

“Of course he is,” Serathin replied simply, frowning slightly as the others gave him a surprised look. “He owns a Sim Den, where did you think we’d be going? The only really successful ones are here, and my friend is no fool when it comes to knowing how to entertain people.”

“But of all the places…” Xander stated.

“Unless you know of a Sim Den where we can access this information securely through their mainframe without raising red flags you can be my guest to go back down into the subway and head there,” Serathin explained. “I’m sure you’ve probably already figured out that your shops have been raided and bugged, maybe even rigged to kill you, so that’s not an option. Now I’m sticking my neck out only because of sheer curiosity of what’s on this file, so if you think that this partnership no longer works for you then we can part ways right now.”

“No!” Alkali shouted suddenly, catching the attention not only of the others but also several passers-by that gave them a strange look while walking. “I mean, let’s just try this first… after all, I bet KatazCorp wouldn’t expect us to go on their home turf to hide.”

“We’re all going to die,” Draggor said with a sigh before motioning on with his hand. “Well, let’s go do it.”

With their fears not being put at ease the three nevertheless continued to follow Serathin through the streets of the district, which were full of flashing lights, loud noises, and crowds of people that were out for some late-night fun. While more people meant that there were probably more eyes on them it also gave them a small cloak with the crowd as they moved with them. With the technomancer taking care of the cameras that lined the street most people here weren’t using handheld devices, which meant that KatazCorp had less eyes in the crowd. It was a small amount of solace, but enough to help them keep their heads and prevent them from jumping at anything that moved in their general direction. Eventually they got to a large storefront that showed a fox in braids with a huge grenade launcher in neon, the sign moving to show the figure blowing something up as they went into the business called The Foxhole.

Though the three remained guarded about their surroundings, especially Draggor as he looked at his wrist commlink and saw that the attached rig was picking up multiple pings on their ID tags, Serathin remained at ease as he went to the cobra that was at the front desk. “Hello there Tana,” the hybrid said as he leaned up against the counter. “I’m hoping Zen is in tonight?”

“He certainly is,” the front clerk replied with a grin. “Are you hear to write your fiction again? I just went through the sim about the dragon and the-“

There was a sudden cough from the draconic sabrewolf that stopped the cobra from continuing, the hybrid grinning sheepishly at the others as they all gave him a look. “We’re actually here for Zen,” Serathin quickly clarified. “These guys have something they need to look at from another perspective and I think that he’s got what we need to do it.”

Tana nodded and ushered the four of them up through the sim den towards the back of the room, and as they did Alkali couldn’t help but look at those that were completely encased in the pod-like structures that were there. Even though the glass was almost completely frosted over he could still see their faces in the glass, and he wondered what they could possibly be experiencing that would make them put their trust in such a machine. As his eyes glanced up he saw the names of the pods printed above them, most of them just FIRR followed by a number… but as he stared at it there was something that he couldn’t quite put his finger on. It was almost like a note of familiarity in it that caused him to space out while he thought of where the connection could possibly be.

Just then he heard something in the pod itself, and when he looked down he saw in shock that one of the pods began to open. The ferret looked around to try and ask someone if this is normal, but when there was nobody all he found himself able to do was stand there in shock as the creature within crawled out. It was a skunk guy, the markings and features clearly unmistakable even though he was covered in a layer of biogel that enabled complete sensation transfer. As it looked up at him though Alkali felt his heart skip a beat when he looked into the skunks eyes and saw… nothing…

“Alkali!” a sudden shout caused the ferret to jump as he looked over to see the others already at the next door, Draggor moving his hand around as though to get his attention. “You coming along or are you just going to gawk at the users for a while?”

When Alkali turned back around he saw that the pod that had been opened was once more closed, and furthermore when he took a closer look inside there was the face of the cheetah girl staring back at him. He attempted to try and get the words that would explain what he had just experienced, but nothing seemed to come to his mind and he ended up closing and opening his mouth a few times before he finally just shook his head and hurried to catch up. Once he got to the door the cobra continued to lead them until they got up to the second floor of the building, which was more like an observation deck where they could see down into the sim den and all the pods that were connected to the network.

Eventually they were led to an office that was completely empty, Tana knocking on the door and looking inside. “Huh, I could have sworn that he was in,” the cobra said as he looked back to the group. “I’ll go see if maybe he’s down in the server room, why don’t you go and have a seat while I get him? It should only be a moment.”

The others nodded and made their way inside, and thought they thought that there was a glass wall that had been separating the office from the rest of the floor they quickly found otherwise. The entire outer wall was merely an illusion to hide the true nature of the room, which was stacked floor to ceiling with various weapons and armor. Serathin made mention that Zen was a bit of a collector of such things as the others immediately started to feel nervous walking into a room that mimicked an armory more than an office. Alkali’s attention immediately went to the wet bar in the corner while Xander looked at the armor mods and Draggor tried to find a computer he could wirelessly hook into.

“He’s got a lot of mead here…” Alkali stated before finding a bottle that caught his attention. “Oh wow, is this real tequila? I’m in the wrong line of work if he can afford this.”

“Yeah, but think of the paperwork you would have to do,” Draggor replied as he looked at his wrist commlink. “Of course I’m not sure that he can do anything around here, I’m not detecting any networks other then the ones for the sim den.”

“Oh, I helped hide them,” Serathin stated. “Part of an ongoing trade since technomancers and people who own technology like this are… often not on good terms with one another.”

Before Draggor could ask why he was suddenly interrupted by Xander, who had found a suit of sleek metallic body armor sitting in the corner. “Hey, do you think he might let me borrow this?” the dragon asked as he knocked on it with his metal hand, hearing it ring out in the room. “It’s real metal too, this guy must have forged it himself with this level of detail.”

Suddenly the armor moved, causing Xander to fall backwards and everyone else to jump as it leveled the gun that it had been holding on them. “Who goes there?!” the electronically altered voice said as the armor continued to move about. “I am the mighty Iron Golem!”

As the others scrambled to their feet and began to get into attacking positions they were suddenly met with loud, racous laughter as the suit of armor dropped the gun and pulled the helmet off to reveal the orange-furred fox head underneath. “You should have seen your faces!” the creature said as the rest of the armor pulled back to allow the male to get out of it, pulling back his bright green braids after he had removed himself. “Gets them every time, you should have seen it when I pulled that trick on the city inspector down in the sim den.”

“Someday someone is going to shoot you,” Serathin stated as he composed himself while the others quickly did the same. “Guys, this is Zen, Zen, these are people that I just met that are trying to get killed by KatazCorp and hold a mysterious video file.”

“That’s kind of the boiled down version…” Alkali said as he shakily poured himself another drink.

“Good enough for me!” Zen replied heartily. “I personally hate those KatazCorp bastards, they think just because they created the technology they can just dictate what people did with it! Why I wanted to try and put a realistic firing range as one of the programs in my sim den and they wouldn’t allow me to take off the safety controls to prevent the shock and pain of getting shot!”

“That sounds like a good thing actually…” Draggor muttered slightly.

“Anyway…” Xander said, getting Zen’s attention. “We need your help to try and figure out what’s on this datadrive that was sent to the ferret so we can either get KatazCorp off our backs or meet whomever sent it so that they can the megacorp off of our backs.”

“Well I can certainly bring the file into the FIRR network that we have here,” Zen explained. “I’m just not sure what it’s going to do to help unless it’s properly formatted to be compatible. Otherwise it’s just a bunch of ones and zeros that are going to be in a cluster, you’ve seen what it looks like Serathin.”

The draconic sabrewolf nodded and held up the datadrive to the fox. “I at least can take a look at it then,” Serathin said. “Why don’t you take Draggor down into the server room with you and we can see about getting these guys the information they require?”

Zen nodded and motioned for the demon to follow him while Serathin looked over at Alkali and Xander, asking if they had ever experienced a FIRR connection before. While the cybernetic dragon nodded the ferret was slower, looking at the two of them before finally shaking his head no. The sabrewolf just smirked at Alkali before he led the three of them down to one of the more private rooms of the sim den where there were only four pods. Serathin snapped his fingers at the control box and three of them began to open to allow them to go inside.

“Hey, wait a second,” Alkali said as he watched Serathin hop gingerly inside of one. “Don’t we have to have a like a tutorial or a safety meeting before we just jump into something like that?”

“You really are new at this, aren’t you?” Serathin asked with a smirk, sticking his tongue out when the ferret shot him a dirty look. “It’s all pretty intuitive actually, you just let the pod take you to where you need to go and we’ll meet up again on the other side in the private lobby. By that point your friend and Zen should have uploaded the file to the network so that we can see it in all its digital glory, including any tasty secrets that might be hidden inside.”

“Okay, I hear you,” Alkali stated as he continued to look into the one meant for him. “But perhaps I should just wait out here, you know, for security reasons.”

“Just get in the pod Alkali,” Xander said as he slid his own body inside one.

The ferret was ready to continue to complain but by this point both the dragon and the hybrid were already settled in and the pod doors had closed over them to seal them inside. Despite knowing that they would be waiting for him and that the process was relatively safe Alkali still felt some reservations as he tentatively put a foot inside. “Don’t you at least have to get naked or something?” he asked no one as he pressed down and found that while the lining of the pod was gel-based it was firm to the touch, causing him to sigh. “Well, I guess there’s a first time for everything.”

Meanwhile down in the server room Draggor found himself watching as Zen began to move cables around, the fox looking at a diagram that he had written down on paper while he shuffled things around. “You know,” the demon said after nearly ten minutes of watching him flounder about. “If you want some help I do know my way around a computer, I can even hook into the server interface for you so we can see what is happening inside the Matrix.”

“That would be great actually,” Zen said as he backed away, allowing the demon to move in as he connected his backpack rig to the system. “Normally I have someone come in here and do all this stuff for me, I just happen to run the business side of things. Serathin also helps sometimes, though he kind of seems a bit clueless when it comes to do anything with the servers themselves.”

“I suppose when you can just manipulate things with a thought you don’t have to really know how the insides work,” Draggor replied as he began to run his subroutines and access the datadrive they had plugged into the server previously. “Speaking of… now I’ve sort of guessed that the reason Serathin is helping is from sheer curiosity, but why are you getting in on this? Especially with most of the hardware in here being KatazCorp property if they find out you’re helping us they’ll shut you down at a minimum.”

“Well, between you, me, and the wall…” Zen started to say, the bigger male leaning down and whispering to Draggor. “Both Serathin and I have noticed something fishy going on with KatazCorp and the FIRR products that they continue to push out. Since he’s a technomancer he doesn’t have to use such things to access the Network, though he does sometimes just to make it easier on himself, but every time I do it there’s just something there that I can’t quite put my finger on.”

“So you think that KatazCorp is doing something with these pods besides just entertaining people?” Draggor asked, Zen nodding. “If that’s true, then why open a sim den? Isn’t that kind of like siding with the enemy?”

“On the contrary,” the fox replied with a chuckle. “Some of the greatest victories in war happened when the other side used the superior technology of the ones they were fighting against them. With Serathin’s help we’ve been using these pods to try and figure out what is going on… though so far we haven’t found anything.”

Draggor just nodded and went back to making sure that the connection between the datadrive and the mainframe was stable so that the three could look into it without any interference. Something was on here that KatazCorp didn’t want Alkali to find out, especially since all of this only started happening when he received that file even though he had been looking into the matter for days at that point. But just like with Zen and the feelings he got in the pod there was something that didn’t add up, like an equation that was missing a variable that prevented anyone from solving it. Hopefully they would find that answer in the deep dive on the FIRR Network and with the help of the technomancer on the inside.

After about a minute there was a small chirp that informed Draggor that the connection was complete and everything was running stable, along with his own programs that he had put into place to monitor the situation. Even though these two were helping him the demon had to make sure that they weren’t just being played, especially now that two of his friends were inside a sim pod that was a potential trap. So far it looked like everything was above the level… he was just going to make sure that it stayed that way. He was also able to tap into the feed of the network itself and extract the video of the lobby so that he and Zen could see exactly what was happening as three shapes formed out of the ether…

Chatper 3:

The first thing Alkali felt after the pod had sealed around him was complete sensory deprivation, especially as the gel warmed to his body while he was surrounded in the complete darkness. Though the ferret attempted not to freak out his first instinct was to yell out the word that Serathin had taught him and Xander to abort he continued to try and hold back his fear. This was not a pleasant experience and his mind was practically screaming as it wondered how anyone could enjoy any of this as the darkness started to get accompanied by a low buzzing noise. For a second he thought that perhaps KatazCorp figured out what they were doing and had locked him into the pod in order to torture him, but it wasn’t long until the darkness seemed to melt away and reveal a park setting.

Alkali quickly gathered his faculties about him once more and as continued to look around the hyper-realistic computer program he began to feel like he was spinning slightly. He had only just became aware that he was standing before he began to fall forwards, only to be stopped by the arms of a blue-scaled dragon whom he instantly recognized even though he looked different. “Xander…” he said as he was helped back to his feet by the completely organic creature. “Your implants, they’re gone?”

“No need for them in the virtual world,” Xander replied as he snapped his fingers and a red Hawaiian shirt appeared on him. “You see why I’ve been trying to get you to come here, this place is amazing.”

The ferret tried to nod only to once more get a sense of vertigo, Xander steadying him once more as he mentioned that the sudden switch to sensory stimulation via the biogel often resulted in temporary dizzy spells until the synaptic response could calibrate so that there were no delays. With the help of the dragon they went over to a nearby bench and sat down so that Alkali could acclimate, taking deep breaths as Xander materialized a bottle of water and gave it to him. The cool liquid felt just like the real thing to Alkali as he drank it down, the container disappearing as soon as it was empty.

“It’s like a hangover without the fun part from the night before,” Alkali grumbled as he continued to try and look around. “Hey, where is our sabertooth friend? I thought he would be here first.”

“I was,” a familiar voice said, the two turning around to see the hybrid standing there. “I was helping with the data integration while your friend Draggor loaded it… from…” when he noticed that the two were just staring at him Serathin’s face turned to a look of confusion. “What?”

“Nothing,” Xander replied, stifling a laugh as Alkali continued to just look with wide eyes. “Nice avatar by the way.”

Serathin took a second before he realized what was going on and looked at himself, noting the rubbery texture of his skin before smirking. “Ah, forgot to change that,” he said as he waved his hand in the air, changing his form to that of what they were more used to in the real world. “In any case now that we’re done with that it’s time to get on with what we’re here for, I had Draggor direct the data to a gazebo that’s actually a secure data note that I can reinforce while we’re here.”

The other two just nodded and walked along the path, avoiding the teleportation method to get there in order to help Alkali get used to his surroundings. Though the dizzy spells were getting less frequent in nature his mind was still having a hard time with what he was looking at. Everything felt so real, from the sun on his face to the wind that was blowing through his fur and even the concrete underneath his shoes, but he knew in the back of his mind that his brain was merely being fed sensory data based on what he was giving back. It was impressive, but in the end it was merely an illusion to reality as they made their way towards the gazebo that sat in the center of an amphitheater.

Even before they got close to the structure they could see that the data was already there, and like Serathin had describe it was mostly a floating cloud of data that occasionally had ones and zeroes floating about it. Once they stepped inside they were surprised to also see that Draggor was there, although unlike their own avatars his looked more like a holographic projection then anything else. Xander was quick to inform Alkali that people could access the Network without having a FIRR device, but that their experience would be much more limited since they could only interact with the world in certain ways. That became clear when they said hello the demon and had to wait a couple of seconds before he replied hello back.

Once they were completely inside Serathin began to put up glowing strings of light between the struts of the gazebo, making a makeshift web around them as Xander and Alkali looked into the file itself. Draggor was also seemed to be looking at it, though his actual experience was just seeing it on his screen as the dragon poked at it. Nothing seemed to happen however and it continued to look like what they had found before, an ordinary video file about an old cartoon skunk. Even when the technomancer came back to do his assessment he stated at first blush that’s what it looked like.

“That… it can’t be all that there is,” Alkali said in frustration as he circled around the cloud like a vulture. “Why would someone send me this and almost get me killed just so that I can see some sort of old video file? If this is all there is then how does it help me find the one that sent me this thing in the first place!”

The words that the ferret said seemed to resonate with the technomancer, who went over to Draggor and got his attention. “Hey, did you look at this file in a secure area?” he asked the demon avatar. “Probably some place with a jammer or a faraday cage or something like that?”

“Of course,” Draggor replied after the slight delay. “I wouldn’t open something that shady without having protections in place to prevent any errant signals.”

“What are you getting at Serathin?” Xander asked.

“It’s what Alkali said actually…” the hybrid stated while pointing at the ferret. “This thing does nothing to help you find someone out in the real world, it’s just a video file with a bunch of other garbage around it. Now since our ferret friend was rather prone to avoiding being on the Matrix in this fashion what if they used this as a lure, not only to eventually bring you in here but also so that they could know where you are?”

“So instead of us finding them…” Xander began to reiterate. “They sent the file so that Alkali would get on the Matrix using a FIRR so that he could find us?”

“That… actually makes a lot of sense,” Draggor replied. “I’m actually doing a deep dive into the file while Serathin is talking and the garbage that he’s talking about actually is something else, but there’s no program in my bag of tricks that can decipher it and all the data is compressed so that it was hidden within the size of the video file itself.” Xander and Alkali looked at each other as the two technologically oriented members of the group continued to discuss back and forth what this other programming could be, only for the demon avatar to hold up his hands. “Wait a second, if this really is a lure program then why hasn’t the sender come here yet?”

There was a moment of pause as they all contemplated what the answer could be, but this time it was Xander who spoke up. “Because we keep preventing him from doing so,” the dragon said as he motioned to the barriers that Serathin had put up. “We’re so keen on keeping out any signals because we thought that we might get tracked… turns out that’s exactly what was happening. All we have to do is remove the signal blockers on both ends and maybe we’ll finally get our answers.”

Serathin looked at them as well and went up to removed them with his claws, only to get stopped by Alkali. “Are we sure we want to do this?” Alkali asked. “What if that signal is exactly what KatazCorp needs in order to track our location?”

“There’s no really good answer to that Alkali,” Draggor stated. “But Zen has told me that if this is something that helps stick it to the company then he’s in, and he has enough security that we are at least not going to be taken completely by surprise. This is your contact though Alkali, so in the end you get to decide what we do with it.”

Though the decision was left to Alkali it didn’t make him feel any better about it as he asked Xander how he did the water trick, then doing the same only to manifest the same brand of tequila that was in Zen’s office. He was just given word from his hacker friend and the technomancer that brought them there that if this was a trap they had no other means but to spring it. If they were right then this could be the answer they would looking for, but if they were wrong… even with Zen’s assurances it was hard to imagine standing up to the might of a megacorporation with just the four of them. Eventually Xander had to prompt the ferret to make a decision, and despite his reservations Alkali found himself nodding his head.

Almost immediately both Serathin and Draggor went into a flurry of activity, pulling down the barriers that had prevented anyone from getting access to their private network while Alkali and Xander stat down once more on side railing of the gazebo. Whether it was nerves from the situation or another round of vertigo from being in the simulation the ferret continued to take swigs from the bottle of alcohol, only to be stopped by the dragon next to him along with the warning that one can get drunk in this realm… at least until they were out of the pod. Alkali just chuckled and stated that he perhaps should have gotten into these things sooner, prompting a similar response from Xander as they waited for the two to finish up.

Eventually Serathin announced that they were ready to go with Draggor keeping one last gate up until they were in position. The three spaced themselves out around the file and gave each other a nod, then Alkali looked over to the demon avatar and told him to connect them to the public network. As the form of Draggor’s avatar flickered slightly Xander told Alkali to brace himself, and in the next second all three of them shuddered slightly as the entire park setting around them shifted. As they continued to wait out the connection everything around them rippled and shimmered, and once it was done they found themselves surrounded by other avatars that were walking and playing and doing otherwise normal things.

“Whoa,” Alkali said as he looked out to see that while most of the creatures were normal like them there were a few that definitely were beyond the scope of reality. “Are these all people?”

“Yep,” Serathin replied simply. “We’re on one of the public servers right now, not only is everyone in the sim den that wanted a park theme here but anyone in a few block radius that owns a FIRR can come here to relax and socialize. I even heard word that the city municipal center wants to put funds towards this to make it an actual local park maintained by the city instead of just a public discourse server.”

“That’s great and all,” Xander stated as he looked around at the others. “But that also means that we’re really exposed out here. Even if KatazCorp isn’t actively looking for us via the Matrix anyone who pings are ID’s is going to know that we’re here, which means its only a matter of time before they track us down.”

The grim reality of the situation continued to hover over them like a storm cloud on an otherwise simulated clear day as they waited for their theory to pan out. As they waited the possibility that they were completely wrong about the whole thing cropped up more than once, especially as the minutes ticked by and none of the avatars even stepped close to this area. Just as Alkali and Draggor discussed possibly pulling back for the day and potentially trying again at another time however the entire gazebo area glitched out for a second, causing all three of them to back away as it crackled and shifted erratically before stabilizing once again. The skies above them suddenly went from clear to cloudy, then to thunderstorms, but as they looked out at the other avatars they continued to bounce and play like nothing was happening.

“You’ll have to excuse the weather,” a voice said suddenly, once more causing the three of them to react and look around for the source that they couldn’t see. “Things get a little strange when I’m around, mostly because I’m not supposed to be here. But what I have to say is too important, so here I am.”

“Oh yeah?” Xander asked. “And where is that exactly?”

Suddenly the entire gazebo shuddered again and everything felt disjointed for a second, and when it stabilized again they saw themselves staring face to face with an avatar of a skunk. Unlike the others though it was completely translucent, almost to the point of being hard to see as they stared at it in awe. “Whoa…” Serathin said as he leaned forward. “Is that, like, a first gen avatar you’re using?”

“You could say that,” the figure replied. “I do not have much time so please listen close. You must take the file I’ve given you and get it to the old fusion power plant that is south of the city, only then can we take down those responsible for it. I have a contact that will attempt to get in contact with you to make your journey easier but already KatazCorp is sending people to your location to end you.”

“But, why?” Alkali asked, stepping forward towards the skunk. “What is this thing you sent me? Why can’t we open it?”

“Oh Alkali,” the skunk avatar said with a smirk. “You’ve already opened it, you just don’t realize how yet.”

As they were about to answer another question the entire gazebo stuttered and crackled again, and when it stopped not only was the avatar gone but the storm with it. “Well that was very unhelpful!” Xander exclaimed as he threw his hands in the air. “Now what the heck do we do?!”

“Let’s get out of here first,” Serathin replied. “If KatazCorp really is on our tails we don’t have a second to lose, use the abort keyword and get out of here and we can grab Draggor on the-“ suddenly the sabrewolf was interrupted as the world once more glitched out, except this time not only had the thunderstorm returned but all the other avatars had vanished as they looked around. “That’s… not good…”

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Meanwhile in the real world a skunk in a very nice business suit stood there on the helipad of the skyscraper owned by KatazCorp, watching as very real storm clouds began to roll into the mega city. It was going to be a bad one, he thought to himself as his gaze turned down towards a large hanger that was also perched on the roof, but while that storm was still hours away the real one was just about to begin as he heard someone rushing up behind him. “Sir!” the panda said after he had taken a moment to catch his breath. “The Matrix Infiltration team got a lock on that file signature! They’ve already locked down the node per your request and the security team is standing by in order to try and take them alive.”

“I don’t think that’s going to be necessary,” the skunk replied as he turned around, grabbing the data pad from the man and seeing the pinged location. “They don’t have anything worth knowing that I don’t already know, so let’s make sure this one is done as cleanly as possible. Have the security team keep a perimeter around the entertainment district and come in only when the targets are confirmed dead and the file had been destroyed, and send a wyrm to deal with those that they trapped in the Matrix.”

“Yes sir!” the panda replied, saluting as best as he could will still breathing hard. “If I may make a suggestion, perhaps you could not go to the roof when this is all happening? Or at least have a commlink on so that we can just relay this to you instead of me having to go up all those flights of stairs to the roof access…”

“Very well Pandez,” the skunk replied, handing the tablet back before raising his fingers in the air. “Plus I don’t need to really be up here anymore anyway, now that we know where they are I can have my friends take care of things.” He snapped his fingers, and in the next second the bay doors to the hanger opened and combat drones the size of dogs began to fly out into the night air. “Also make sure to call PR and make sure they have a decent story for why a sim den had to be raided… make it sound like faulty black-market equipment or something like that.”

“They’re already working on a story,” Pandez replied as he watched the skunk leave. “Is there anything else sir?”

At first the skunk shook his head as he continued to walk down the stairs while his drones filled the air, only to stop dead in his tracks and look back at the panda. “You said that they were connected to the public network, correct?” he asked, Pandez nodding his head. “I think that their hardware may be a little out of date, why don’t you have them send an update patch. It would be very beneficial I think.”

“But, Kataze!” Pandez replied suddenly, only to have the skunk look back and stare daggers at the other man. “I mean, sir, are you sure you want to release that so soon? I mean, we don’t even know if that’s going to be compatible with old hardware like that.”

“Oh, I’m sure it won’t be,” Kataze replied with an evil grin. “But that’s going to be half the fun in watching it.”

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Draggor and Zen looked in shock as the feed they were watching suddenly went dead, followed by the words stating that a priority lock-down had been put into place. “Blast them all to hell!” Zen shouted. “I should have known that KatazCorp would be up to something!”

“Wait, what just happened?” Draggor asked as he attempted to hack back into the system.

“It’s a security lock-down that is supposed to be only available to certain law enforcement entities to prevent hackers from wrecking havok on multiple FIRR nodes,” Zen explained through gritted teeth as he began to flip a few switches himself, only to grow increasingly frustrated. “It’s supposed to be for emergencies only and since I haven’t gotten any calls it means that they likely just used it to trap your friends inside!”

“Now wait just a second,” the demon said, digesting all this new information as quickly as he could while still trying to break through the newly established firewall. “They can’t just lock people in those pods and keep them online, the feedback spikes alone would be enough to harm people. There has to be some sort of backdoor in order to open the pods and get them offline.”

“Of course there is!” Zen said after banging his hand against the server door. “It’s a manual release lever that I uh… modified myself after hearing such a thing was possible. Unfortunately it’s right on the pod itself, so we’re going to have to go back upstairs and release your friends.”

Draggor just cursed loudly and unplugged his rig, knowing that he wasn’t going to be making any progress down in the server room as they dead locked the entire server. There probably wasn’t even more power running to the programs anymore, the entire thing being hijacked by KatazCorp in order to keep the three in the FIRR node without any means of escape. It was just good that they hadn’t all decided to go in, if they had then all of them, except perhaps Serathin, would have been stuck there with no way out. Thanks to Zen’s illegal tinkering however all they had to do is get to the pods and get them out so they could make a run for it.

“Zen!” a voice that Draggor recognized as the cobra from earlier suddenly went over the intercom. “We’ve gotten perimeter alarms all over the place! They’re going to attempt a breach!”

“Police?” the fox asked.

“Drones!” the cobra replied.

The fox sighed and rubbed his head, then went over to a box marked emergency fire extinguisher. “Well that’s not good,” he said as he opened a sliding panel on the door and began to punch in a code. “Going to be in for a fight.”

“Why do you say that?” Draggor asked.

“Police means arrests and questioning,” Zen explained as the panel chirped and turned green, then the door popped open to allow the fox to grab the auto shotgun inside. “Drones means death and a lousy cover-up.” The demon suddenly found himself with a rifle in his hand as Zen went over to the intercom and pressed the talk button. “Security protocol maximum, I want the shutters down and every countermeasure we have up and running by the time we get to the ground floor.”

Draggor looked at the weapon in his hand and asked Zen why he had something like this in the box meant for a fire extinguisher, only to hear the fox chuckle and say that they need to get to his office. Though it wasn’t the demon’s first time holding a firearm, working in Cerberus Alley everyone had some semblance of firearms training since most of the time there was illegal activity going down, he had never really used it in a combat situation before. It made him unease as they made their way up the stairs towards the ground floor with Zen leading the way, though from the look of it the other male was having no such qualms about his situation. In fact Draggor swore he saw the small beginnings of a smile on his face as they made their way from the stairwell onto the sim den floor.

When they got up to the top of the stairs the two of them could see that the shutters were down like he had ordered, including the front of the building as they poked their heads out and looked around. When it didn’t look like there were drones flying all over the place they continued to make their way out, carefully stepping forward. For Draggor it seemed like they were only moving an inch a minute as he brought up his weapon as well. Part of him wanted to rush forward and get to those trapped in the sim pods, but just as he was about to take action into his own hands the fox stopped him with his arm and shook his head.

Zen looked around before he saw a potted plant near him in the hallway and grabbed it, then looked over at the shuttered window that they would have to cross to get back to the second floor stairs. With the demon still watching him in question he swung his arm back and forth a few times before flinging it forward into the air. Even before it landed on the ground there was a loud crash of glass and screech of metal as a drone burst through the shutters and collided with it, sending both itself and the plant into the opposite wall before exploding in a shower of sparks. “Breaching drone,” Zen said simply as he ran forward, aiming his shotgun right at the hole before Draggor did the same.

Suddenly the air was filled with gunfire as several drones swarmed around the hole that had been created in their defenses, expended shells flying from the weapons of the two as they continued to shot down the machines. Though they were quite armored it appeared they were no match for the weapons of Zen, but as they continued to move back they found that for every drone they destroyed another appeared in their place. Eventually they got to the back where the stairs led upstairs as well as towards the sim den main pod bay, which was also where the other three rested.

“Hold on now,” Zen said as he grabbed Draggor by the shoulder and pulled him back towards the stairs. “If they’re coming through here they’re probably already in there. We’re going to need some real heavy firepower before we go rescue your friends unless we want to get trapped and killed.”

Though Draggor desperately wanted to rush in and help the others he knew that the fox was right, especially as their brief break in shooting caused several more of the mechanical sphere-like objects to float in and head towards them. They were just going to have to wait until they could get there, the demon thought as they resumed fire and continued their march up the stairs towards the fox’s office.

Chapter 4:

In the digital world Alkali, Xander, and Serathin had started to run through the park as lightning crashed down around them, exploding the ground near their feet as though trying to strike them after their unsuccessful attempt to leave the simulation. As they ran the technomancer attempted to explain that it was likely KatazCorp that somehow managed to deny their log-out procedure, effectively trapping them inside with no portal out. It also meant that they were likely going to try and cause them to experience a cascading catastrophic synapse failure, which meant they were going to try and kill them in the simulation in such a manner that would also cause their brains to die in real life. The only thing they could do at that moment was try to find a haven in the node that might allow them to hold on without getting murdered by whatever the megacorp was sending their way to get the job done.

“Can’t you just warp us out of here or something?!” Xander shouted at Serathin after another bolt of lightning struck mere inches from him and nearly blew him off his feet. “You’re a technomancer!”

“I don’t think you know how technomancers work!” Serathin shouted back. “I might be able to get myself out of here, but I would still probably be locked in a pod with no way out! At least here I can help you two get out alive!”

“Yeah, some help you are!” Alkali chimed in. “Could you at least make it rain tequila or something?!”

Serathin rolled his eyes and the three continued to run until they were completely outside of the park and into the city itself. With the storm raging in increasing intensity debris had started to blow towards them, adding yet another hazard to the lighting already attempting to hit them. At the first skyscraper they arrived at Serathin pushed them over towards the door and they barreled through it, closing them and backing away just as a street sign attempted to impale them. With their avatars out of the storm they breathed a sigh of relief, then looked around the lobby itself to find it completely empty.

Since the park was the primary part of the simulation the coders likely didn’t bother to put anything in building itself except for window dressing, Serathin explained as they dried themselves off as best they could, in fact had Serathin not created door access they wouldn’t have gotten in at all. But what was a shortcoming was also a boon as the FIRR node didn’t recognize the inside of the building as viable area and therefore couldn’t be influenced by outside code, namely the storm and the programming that had attempted to kill them. It was a Matrix dead zone, and though that meant they couldn’t log out from there they already weren’t able to anyway. With immediate danger no longer their concern they instead moved to figure out how they were going to escape from the entire Matrix, especially with no idea on what’s going on in the outside world.

The three decided to move up in the building itself, if only to try and see what might be coming for them next. Even though they weren’t outside anymore the storm continued to rage on, and as they climbed up several flights they could see that tornados had been added to mix now as well. “Man, I would hate to be out there right now,” Xander said as he watched a garbage truck get picked up and flung into another building, only to have it bounce right off. “Are all the other people dead now or something?”

“Probably not,” Serathin replied with a sigh as he sat on the carpeted floor. “When we were isolated they probably just shunted the rest of the node on a separate server to make sure they didn’t cause any collateral damage. Good news is that no one else will be hurt, bad news is there’s no one out there that realizes something bad is happening to us.”

“There’s got to be some way to make contact with Draggor and the outside world,” Alkali stated as he began to pace back and forth before stopping and looking at Serathin. “Serathin, you said that you can create a portal out of here if you wanted to attempt to save yourself, right?” The hybrid glanced between the dragon and ferret, wondering what Alkali was getting at as he slowly nodded. “Could you somehow create a connection between our node and any other node, even if it was like just a text service?”

The draconic sabrewolf thought about it for a second before he finally nodded once more. “It’s going to take a lot of my power to do something like that and you’re not going to have a lot of time,” he explained as they went over to one of the empty desks. “you might get a chance to get out one, maybe two messages before the portal collapses, not to mention… well, nevermind.”

“Nevermind what?” Xander asked.

“Nevermind meaning it’s not important,” Serathin said as he placed his hands over the desk and concentrated. “Have who you’re going to send this message to in your mind, you may only get one bite of the apple.”

The other two watched as the hybrid concentrated, huffing slightly as his entire body began to glow. They watched as bits of data seemed to appear out of nowhere and fly towards the spot that Serathin concentrated on. They coalesced into a blob on the desk before they formed into a computer, though it was definitely not a modern one. It looked like one or two that Alkali would get in the shop occasionally, which he would either deny outright or only pay a few credits for so that he could have it for the novelty. It seemed to work however, and as the sabrewolf continued to concentrate it suddenly flicked on and high-pitched whining noises began to emit from it.

“Ew, dial-up?” Xander commented as Alkali sat down.

“Hey, you’re lucky it’s not a telegraph machine,” Serathin shot back as his arms began to shake. “Hurry up, you have about a minute.”

The ferret nodded and connected to his secured account, having to wait for the site to populate before he could make his message. He could feel himself beginning to sweat as he realized it probably would do no good to send something to Draggor; he was either well aware of the situation or able to find out easily since their connection had been severed. Instead he needed to think of the long game… what connections he had that would benefit the most, what favors could he use in order to try and not only help their current situation but down the road as well. There were quite a few to choose form, he was rather good at his job after all, and after quick but careful consideration he made his choice and typed in an extremely brief message before hitting send.

As he saw the confirmation go through the sabrewolf standing next to him shuddered almost violently, to the point where Xander went over to grab him if he should fall down. With the computer still visible and the connection still active Alkali asked if he could get one more message out, and after a few seconds Serathin squeezed his eyes shut and nodded. The ferret quickly turned back to his account and typed out the address that he wanted the message to go to, followed by a few brief words that he hoped would be understandable to the recipient. When he pushed send for the second time the computer screen cracked right down the middle as it sent, and a mere second after he saw the confirmation message the entire system shattered and crumbled into shards of data that quickly disappeared.

As Alkali breathed a sigh of relief that he had gotten through Xander suddenly had to dart forwards once again and grabbed Serathin as he nearly fell backwards. When the dragon propped up the technomancer there was blood coming out of his nose and mouth and his eye looked like he had popped a blood vessel. “Good god man,” Alkali said as the sabrewolf sputtered and coughed. “What happened?”

“I told you that this would use a lot of my power,” Serathin replied as he attempted to regain his breath, gasping between words. “This place we’re in isn’t connected to the Matrix, and that is where I get my power from. If there is no connection then we must make due with… other sources, and even if we were connected to the Matrix my abilities aren’t infinite.”

“That sounds like a pretty fancy way of saying that you could die in here,” Alkali stated.

“We all could die in here very easily,” Serathin replied as Xander helped him sit down. “It’s just for Technomancers that reality is a little easier to come by then for you all. Programs and safeguards help keep you from dying since all you have here is your avatar, for me this place and this body are as real as what’s out there in those pods.”

“Well thanks for risking yourself to let me get those messages out there then,” Alkali said as he looked out at the increasingly worsening storm. “Hopefully you using your power for me allowed me to use my power to get us out of this entire situation…”

Meanwhile Draggor and Zen continued to fight their way up the stairs, keeping the tide of drones at bay even as their ammo reserves ran low. There had only been a few extra boxes of shells in the fire extinguisher cabinet, Zen reloading as Draggor shot and vice versa. It had lasted them all the way until they got to the top of the stairs and the second they set foot on the next floor they both hear their guns go click with empty chambers. Zen told the demon to run as he took the empty shotgun and threw it down the stairs at the drones that were attempting to come up before turning to bolt himself.

It appeared that while their furious defense had slowed the advancement of the mechanical creatures, by the time the two of them got to the door one of the bolder ones had floated and started to streak towards their position. With its ability to fly it was much quicker than them, closing the distance with its deadly blade pointed straight at them. Draggor flung open the door and practically dove inside with Zen right behind him, both just trying to scramble into the office before the drone had a chance to stab them. Just as they got on the other side of the threshold they could hear the micro jets of the drone fire and come screaming straight towards the both of them with deadly force.

The next thing they heard was a loud bang followed by the shattering of metal as they turned back just in time to see the drone crumble backwards and fall to the floor. Their heads slowly turned back around to the cobra with a sniper rifle pointed at them, the smoke still rising from the end of the barrel. “You might want to shut the door,” Tana said as he fired again, hitting another drone that was just about to come up the stairs. “You’re letting in a draft.”

“I knew there was a reason I hired you,” Zen said as they closed the door and locked it, strengthening the projection to maximum to fool the sensors of the drones. “Alright, that should give us time for a quick breather and arm up. It’s dealer’s choice Draggor so go ahead and pick whatever you want out, though I would recommend something that throws a lot of bullets very fast.”

Draggor looked at the wall of weapons as Zen grabbed a duffle bag from underneath his desk and began to load it up with the help of the cobra, the demon trying to figure out just what he could possibly use in order to take down an entire legion of drones. Even as he looked out through the one-way glass he could see that nearly a dozen of them had already come up with more on the way, and though they appeared to be momentarily fooled by the projection on the wall of an empty office it probably wouldn’t stay that way for long. As he looked back at the wall, he was thankful that he was at least spoiled for choice as he grabbed another auto shotgun with a drum clip and checked it.

“Ah, I see you are a man of culture as well,” Zen said with a chuckle as he tossed Draggor a shoulder strap. “Put that one on your back, if we’re going to get out of here we’ll to need to clear the field first.” Draggor wasn’t quite sure what Zen meant by that until the fox took a light machine gun and put it down on the desk with a heavy thud, followed by a box of ammo that probably held about two hundred and fifty rounds. When the demon looked over at Tana he saw that he was readying a similar gun with the sniper rifle he had used previously strapped to his back.

“What about you?” Draggor asked as he grabbed the weapon, nearly falling over backwards from the sheer weight of it even with his fit physique. “You got something like this in mind?”

“Oh yes,” Zen replied, his gaze going over at the corner of his office. “I think I have just the thing…”

Outside of the office nearly three dozen drones had come up to the last known location of the two that they were trying to chase, their sensors attempting to pick up where they had gone after their trail suddenly ended. With their swarm-based technology they could cover a lot of ground very quickly, but as they came up empty they knew something wasn’t right while they scanned everywhere to try and pick up a trail. Suddenly however all of their sensors lit up at once as the projection of the empty office disappeared, revealing the two they were searching for, one of which was in a suit of armor, along with a third. That wasn’t what had tripped all of their alarms though, what did it was the two LMG’s that we being held along with the armored individual holding a minigun that belonged on the bottom of a fighter jet.

The glass of the outer office wall exploded outwards as the three of them began to fire all at once, the drones scrambling to get out of the kill zone as hundreds of bullets were spread out over the entire second floor. The entire area had become a shooting gallery and almost all of the drones that were up there exploded like fireworks as the barrels of the three became red hot from the consistent firing. When they did finally stop they stood in amidst a sea of brass as they looked out at the dozen of destroyed drones.

“Well that did the trick,” Zen said as he took the minigun and tossed it to the side while Tana and Draggor did the same. “We’re going to get calls from the neighbors for that one though.”

“Let’s just go,” Draggor replied as he grabbed the shotgun from his back and picked his way over the drones, at least until he was grabbed from behind. “Hey, what are you doing!?”

“Taking the express route!” Zen shouted with a loud laugh as he scooped up Tana with the other arm and flung himself down into the main sim pod room, the glass separating it and the second floor already obliterated by the hail of bullets as he crashed down to the first floor. There were still a few lingering drones down there and Zen and Tana began to fire on them as Draggor ran towards the private room where his friends were, still hoping beyond hope that they were alright.

Back in the simulation Xander and Alkali continued to watch out the window as the storm reached a fevered pitch, the park nearly becoming unrecognizable as trees and structures were being ripped up by the roots. “It feels like it’s been hours,” the ferret said with a sigh. “Do you think Draggor even knows we’re in here?”

“It’s actually only probably been a few minutes out there,” Xander explained. “With our connection to the real world gone we’re probably experiencing time dilation, something about the mind being able to process things faster in the simulation then in the real world and all that stuff. Or it could just be we’re trapped in a building in the matrix with no way out and watching this place tear itself apart just so it can kill us.”

“That could be it,” Alkali replied, putting his head on his knees. “I don’t suppose we could conjure up any more of that tequila? Might be our last drink.”

“Not connected to the matrix,” Xander chuckled, though he stopped suddenly when they both began to see the winds calming down and the pitch-black clouds turning to grey. “Wait, do you think that’s Draggor? Maybe they took back control of the Matrix?”

 Just as their hopes began to rise up that they were about to escape they saw something moving in the increasingly lightening sky, like a dot that was slowly getting bigger as whatever it was approached him. When it became big enough to see it was clear that it was neither Draggor nor friendly as they began to back away from the windows. The creature was a dragon, but unlike Xander this one was feral in nature with bright purple scales and probably almost as big as a house. As it swooped by it let out an ear-deafening roar that not only had them to cover their ears but also caused every window in the building to shatter right in front of them.

“That’s not good!” Alkali said as they ran further into the building where they had laid Serathin down to rest, still able to see the dragon flying around outside of the building. “I thought Serathin said that the Matrix didn’t consider this building to be a thing?!”

“Well I’m not going to go out and ask it!” Xander shouted back as they continued to run, bracing themselves as the entire building shuddered and almost knocked them off of their feet. The two wondered what had just happened and looked back to see that the draconic creature had taken a piece of the building and flew off with it. “This day just keeps getting better and better…”

“Less talking, more running!” Alkali said as he went to the semi-conscious hybrid and helped to pick him up, though he soon found Xander practically able to lift up the other person completely and swing him over his shoulder. Even in the Matrix simulation it appeared that the dragon retained his cybernetically enhanced strength, though it was another question that the ferret reminded himself to ask later as they started to head towards the stairwell. Just as they were about to start going up however they caught a glimpse of the dragon flying towards them… and more importantly the chunk of building that had been thrown in their direction by the creature.

Xander shouted to brace and the three of them huddled behind an inside wall as the ripped out piece of the building smashed into the rest of the structure, ripping a huge section of the floor away and well as a sizable piece of the rest of the building. It had just missed them however, the tile under their feet the last bit of the floor that remained from the impact of the skyscraper. As they looked down at the gaping hole where the rest of the structure had been hit they realized that the entire skyscraper wasn’t toppling over. In fact except for where the dragon’s projectile had hit there wasn’t even anything falling off of it anymore as the entire top floors were being suspended on only a quarter of the building.

“Of course,” Xander said as they looked down at the long drop to the destroyed floors below. “This building doesn’t have destructive physics, so it’s not going to fall because it’s not programmed too.”

“Tell that to the pissed off dragon,” Alkali said as they began to rush up the stairs once more.

“Dragon…” Serathin said as his eyes half-opened. “Wyrm… it’s a Wyrm…”

“Yep, wyrms are dragons,” Xander said as he continued to carry Serathin up with them. “You just stop talking now, don’t want this thing to try and find us because you’re yammering on about terminology.”

There was a loud groan from the sabrewolf that the two largely ignored as they tried to keep up the pace, stopping briefly as part of the wall of the stairwell was ripped out by huge talons that caused them to yelp and look back. When they did they saw a bright yellow eye seem to look through the hole it had made and stare directly at them, the walls reverberating with its growl. The two stopped briefly and looked at each other, then were prompted to move once again as one of the thick talons pierced the wall once more mere inches from Alkali’s head. More than once they had to duck down and practically roll out of the way as it attempted to skewer them before it took a more direct route and smashed the stairwell a floor or two above their heads.

“Looks like this is our floor!” Xander shouted as they went down a few steps and got out of the stairwell just in time to avoid the dragon’s claws scraping down and destroying the entire thing before the door closed. “Our situation is not improving…”

“We just have to stay alive as long as possible,” Alkali said as they looked around the area, which was a carbon copy of the office space they had holed up in a few floors down. “Thanks to building physics the dragon has to literally tear this place apart in order to get at us, so that should buy us, what, a few minutes?”

The two ducked down instinctively once more as they heard the crunch of metal and groaning of concrete above them, followed by a loud roar. They immediately started to run deeper into the skyscraper as they heard the creature smashing around above them, punching down with its huge paws in an attempt to try and get at them. It was clear that the wyrm had gotten an idea of what to do and had started to scrape away at the sides of the floors to continue to limit their options. More than once Xander or Alkali had to be pulled back as part of the office roof collapsed in by a paw or the head of the dragon pushing down looking for them, those bright yellow eyes practically glinting as they searched.

Finally it had gotten down to a small private office that was in the middle of the floor, one of the walls already partially collapsed as they hunkered down underneath the desk. “Well, I think this is it,” Xander said quietly as they heard the dragon heading towards their position. “For what it’s worth, I can’t think of a much better death then being eaten by a dragon next to you.”

“And I’m glad that I learned something new about you,” Alkali replied before his tone got more serious. “You think we should wake up Serathin before all die?” As the ferret looked over the shoulder where the hybrid had been however he was surprised to see that he had disappeared, and Xander was just as surprised as he glanced over and saw that the space was empty. “What… the…”

“Did he just leave us here to die?” Xander asked as he shook his head. “What a dick.”

Suddenly the wall that had been partially destroyed already was ripped away, revealing the dragon behind it as the two grabbed onto each other and screamed. The creature seemed to have a bemused look on his face as he saw the two underneath the desk holding onto one another as their shouts of fear finally faded. “Well, it was an honor being with you to the end Xander…” the ferret said as stoically as he could, though it quickly turned to confusion when he turned his head and saw that he was holding nothing but air. “Damnit!”

Alkali’s attention was quickly brought back to the shadow looming over him as he turned to see nothing but the teeth, tongue and inner maw of the dragon quickly advancing towards him. The ferret let out a scream as he put his arms out in front of him in meager defense, waiting for those jaws to snap shut and devour him whole. Suddenly everything turned to darkness and he continued to scream, a long drawn out shout that eventually ended when he ran out of breath. When he had to breathe in again he took that second of pause to lower his arms and look around, seeing Draggor standing there next to the open pod door looking down at him.

“We don’t have time for you to be messing around!” the demon snouted as he grabbed the ferret by the hand and hoisted him until he was standing up. “You can play with the dragon later, right now we need to get out of here.”

It took a few seconds for Alkali to realize that he was no longer in a skyscraper being assaulted by a winged creature, instead he was inside the sim pod room with Xander already stepping out of his pod while the cobra they had met earlier was helping Serathin out of his. It appeared that they had all been taken out of the simulation by the demon manually, though their troubles were apparently not over as they could hear the sounds of fighting in the next room. Draggor filled all of them in as quickly as they could while they made their way back over to the door in order to leave. Once everyone was out of the pod and reacclimated themselves Draggor and Tana took point, being the only two with guns, and carefully opened the door to see Zen fighting with the drones still.

…except that Zen wasn’t fighting drones, instead he was being besieged by regular people in sim suits that were violently attempting to bring him down. The group stared in shock at the sight of seeing people attempting to bring down the heavily armored creature, the situation almost humorous if it wasn’t for the murderous looks and bloodthirsty cries coming from the dozen people that had crawled out of the sim pods. “You cannot bring me down, for I am mightier than all of you!” Zen shouted, punching and throwing people off of him until he was completely dog-piled, everyone wincing slightly as they heard the sound of metal crashing on metal as he was tipped over and started getting wailed on by bare firsts. “Help, I have been brought down!”

“Do we… shoot them?” Alkali asked, Xander shaking his head and taking the lead as he cracked his metallic knuckles. The cobra stepped forward as well as he slipped on a pair of fingerless gloves, the knuckles crackling with electricity as he flexed his fingers. The two charged forward and as the frenzied mob turned their attention towards them it was just in time for one of them to get punched square in the jaw with the dragon’s fist. Even without his augmented strength, which he didn’t use for fear of just caving the lizardman’s head in, he saw a few teeth fly out of their mouth before they toppled down to the floor.

Once into the fray they managed to pull enough of the crazed creatures’ attention off of Zen so that he could get back up, kicking one of the remaining guys off of him while pushing another all the way across the room. As the cobra and dragon continued to help with the fight they told the others to get to the back door and that they would catch up with them shortly. By that time Serathin had gotten back on his own two feet and had taken out his collapsible batons, though he remained in the back with the others in a mostly defensive posture as he whacked the knee of a charging bull and caused them to collapse to the floor in pain. Once they had managed to get Zen out of the fray completely they all immediately backed up through the back door and pushed through it, with the armored fox being the last and locking the metal behind him.

The sound of banging immediately filled the air as Zen backed up just in time to see several of their angry faces in the plexiglass window practically screaming at them, though most of it was garbled and incoherent as the group continued to make their way out of the Sim Den and into the streets. As they walked into the night air however they noticed that not only were there more drones still flying about but most of the area was otherwise empty. Zen informed them that it was likely some sort of police perimeter, making sure that even if they did manage to escape they would still get arrested and have all sorts of nasty things done to them before being killed in custody. As they scanned the area with looks of concern and worry the only one who had retained his composure was Alkali, the ferret looking down at his watch before looking up to see a pair of headlights coming directly towards them.

It was a police van, but as everyone began to shrink back into the building Alkali just moved forward to the cube as it came up to their position with lights flashing. “I was hoping that you would get my message,” the ferret said as he looked in to see the lapine driver grinning back at him. “How was the drive Jake?”

“Fast and furious as always,” Jake replied as he motioned for them to get into the car. “Let’s go people, your ride share is here! I have to get this baby back to the station before they realize that I stole it.”

The rest of the group immediately piled in, minus Zen who had to take off the armor he was wearing first, much to his chagrin but to the insistence of the others, before he could squeeze in with the rest of them. It was a tight fit even being a van, but eventually they all managed to get inside with some on top of one another before they closed the doors shut and sped off with the lights and siren going full blast. For all of them it was the end of a long night… but as Alkali watched them breeze past the barricades that the real police had set up he began to think that this was only getting started.

After dropping off Tana at his place, the cobra thanking them for the interesting time and Zen telling him to probably not come into work tomorrow, Jake asked the remaining members of the crew where they wanted to go. That was not a question that any of them seemed ready to answer, especially not after they had gotten though an ordeal where they had all almost lost their lives. Xander spoke up that they might want to go to the location that the strange skunk avatar had told them about, the old fusion plant, while Draggor suggested that they find a place to lay low for the rest of the night. Alkali had stayed quiet however as he used his commlink to connect to his anonymous account and see if he got a reply e-mail from his second contact, and when he saw that there was one he told Jake that they were going to need to go to a bar instead.

“Alkali, I know we’ve had a tough time with this all,” Zen spoke up. “But do you really think that now is a good time for a drink?”

“It is when it also means I get to meet with an old friend first,” Alkali explained, Draggor and Xander nodding in agreement since they both had a better idea of what was going on than their two recent additions to the group. “If anyone can help us get ahead of this thing it’s him, I just hope that I have enough credits on me to pay his bar tab.”

With Jake on the clock to get the police van back unnoticed to where he found it he had to drop them all off at the bar before wishing them luck and speeding off, though it was actually a hotel that happened to have a bar inside of it. Alkali asked Serathin if he had recovered enough to pull off his camera trick, the hybrid nodding as the group of them went inside. Though Xander and Draggor knew enough that they would be meeting one of Alkali’s contacts, they still weren’t quite sure which one as the ferret told them to wait by the pool and to try and act natural. With the others heading off to wait Alkali straightened his top hat and went into the hotel bar, where at this time of night he only saw two people; the bartender and the one that he intended to meet.

“Quite late for a meeting my boy,” the cockroach said as he shook the hand of the ferret while he got on the barstool next to him. “You know what I think about such clandestine affairs.”

“I know, I know,” Alkali replied as he took a credit chip and put it on the bar. “It makes you very thirsty. I do hope that’s enough to cover the tab?”

The other man took the chip and put it into a reader, looking at the total before giving a nod that caused his antennae to sway slightly. “I think that should about do it for the moment,” he said as he pocketed the chip and swirled the glass of wine in front of him. “So tell me, what can Uncle Kage do for you?”

“It’s about KatazCorp,” Alkali stated, a sour look appearing on Kage’s face before he took a sip of his wine. “I know you didn’t want anything to do with it and told me to stay away but we’re caught up in something big here, something that involves another person that’s sending me coded messages and making me go into the Matrix under full immersion. We just escaped with our lives about twenty minutes ago.”

“I did hear something about a big how do you do going down in the entertainment district,” Kage replied stoically. “Didn’t think that it would involve you, at least not until I got a very strange message in my e-mail from you.” The cockroach took the commlink on his wrist and tapped on it, showing the short message that had been sent from him. “Trapped Matrix sim den help drunk bug out soon… so eloquent.”

“It got the point across,” Alkali replied. “You’re here now, aren’t you?”

“I suppose I am, though it’s only because I saw the heat falling on you when I looked up that Sim Den where the message came from and saw it under siege” Uncle Kage replied as he finished the glass of wine and stood up, patting the ferret on the back. “Now I can certainly help you the best I can with the resources at my disposal, but you’re going to have to look into how you can clear up this little snafu that you’re in. Also, I may want to watch the news if I were you.”

“Thank you for all your help, I really appreciate it,” Alkali stated, turning back towards the bar before he registered what Kage had said and turned back around. “Wait, what do you mean I need to watch the news!?”

Chapter 5:

“More information is coming out on the raid of the Sim Den known as The Foxhole earlier this night,” the lupine anchorwoman stated as she looked at the screen. “It is said that those responsible for the maiming and mental damage of nearly a dozen FIRR users is none other than the proprietor of this establishment, who along with four others is also responsible for the Release Day Outage that left the entire city without power or Matrix Connectivity. We’re about to join Jonas down in the street who is live on the scene.”

The scene on the television switched from the wolfess to a bull man in a suit standing down on the street with the illuminated neon sign of The Foxhole glimmering behind him. “Thank you so much Clara,” the reporter said as he straightened up and motioned behind him to the building. “Police and paramedics are currently on the scene right now where they’re treating the customers of this establishment for what they’re describing as severe mental trauma caused by black market sim pods. Not only is the group that is believed to have been operating out of this establishment running an illegal Sim Den, but authorities have also discovered a small arsenal that belonged to the club’s owner. Those weapons were used in order to blast their way out of a raid conducted by police and independent security forces of KatazCorp, who were the ones to discover the activity in the first place, and though there was extensive damage the use of drones ensured that there were no metahuman causalities on what could have been a slaughter.”

“Thank you so much for that report,” the wolfess reporter said as the screen flashed back to her, where five pictures were put up on the screen of their respective faces. “Police are urging the citizens of the city if you see any of these five that were involved with these terrifying events that you report them immediately, but do not approach as they are considered well-armed and extremely dangerous.” As the wolfess was about to continue on her attention was suddenly taken off-screen, nodding slightly to someone in the background before she looked back at the camera. “This station has just received word that CEO Kataze of KatazCorp is about to make a public statement on the Sim Den raid.”

The screen went from the news room to the outside of a building where a skunk in a nice suit stood in front of a podium with a panda man standing next to it. “We here at KatazCorp are saddened to hear that this group of corporate terrorists have not only tried to bring down a company that has only attempted to bring joy and entertainment to the masses, but have also harmed innocent people in the process,” Kataze stated sternly as he looked at the cameras. “What we have found after a thorough investigation of the technology used in the Sim Den was that they had attempted to pirate our latest software and reverse engineer it using black market sim pods to avoid detection. We here at KatazCorp take our customer’s safety as our highest priority and will soon be announcing the new product that these people attempted to rip off for their own gain, and I can assure you that the only simulation that these five will be running soon is a prison scenario.”

It appeared that Kataze was about to take more questions, but before they could hear any more the television was shut off by a very angry fox. “Do you know how much I had to spend in order to get actual premium sim pods from the KatazCorp manufacturers!?” Zen practically shouted as he paced around the hotel room. “This is outrageous! Scandalous!”

“Yep, sucks all around,” Serathin said simply as he laid back in one of the two beds the room had, his green eyes glowing as he interacted with the Matrix via his power.

“Well the good news is it looks like they don’t know where we are,” Alkali said as he took the bag of ice they had gotten from the nearby hotel machine and pressed it against his forehead. “Since they’re reaching out to the news that means that KatazCorp has decided they want us to live for a little while longer instead of just sticking us in the bottom of the river in an effort to find us. The bad news is that they also want us to take the fall for a bunch of crimes we didn’t commit and we’ll probably go to prison for the rest of our lives.”

“Pfft, speak for yourself,” Serathin replied with a smirk. “You know that prisons are mostly electronic these days? I could probably walk out before they realized what I can do.”

“That’s if KatazCorp doesn’t figure out you’re a technomancer first,” Draggor chimed in as he worked on his backpack rig that he had set on the desk. “I have the feeling that we’d be spending more time in the basement of the company skyscraper rather than in actual prison, you know, just because they hate us.”

Alkali could hear the others continue to talk back and forth as he focused his attention more on the datadrive that they still had possession of, the demon having the foresight to grab it out of the servers before they went up to deal with the drone attack. Being framed by a major megacorp was just one piece of the puzzle, and in the grand scheme of things it was a small one at that. What was so important that this skunk avatar they met in the Matrix had to cover their tracks so well, and that the boss of KatazCorp wanted them dead for? It was one of many questions that they had and none of which could be answered in a hotel room that was given to them by a cockroach with a love of wine.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door that caused them all to pause, even the snoozing Xander waking up and readying his cybernetic limbs to attack. With Alkali being the least recognizable of the five he went up to the door in order to look, seeing through the peep hole at who it could be. His face turned to that of confusion as he saw someone he didn’t know, a rare instance for him, though as he stood there the badger man seemed to look straight at him before he held up a card to the peephole for a second and then slid it under the door. When he reached down and picked it up he saw that written on the back was the code that he and Uncle Kage used to communicate when under duress, which prompted him to open the door and let the mustelid inside.

“First of all, before any of you say anything I need you all to give me some money,” the badger said as he took his briefcase on the floor near the television and held out his hand at all five of them. “Whatever you got on you is fine, the cockroach is footing the rest of the bill, but I need to make double sure that we got airtight confidentiality going on before I touch this hornet’s nest of a case.”

The others looked at one another before going back to the badger, who just motioned with his eyes down to his hand and wiggled his fingers. All five of them took credit chips and put them in the hands of the lawyer, who immediately pocketed them and handed out a contract for them to sign. As the other four put their signatures on them Serathin was the only one not to go and grab his, motioning with his hand before laying back down on the bed he had been on previously. When the badger looked down he saw that the hybrid’s signature was already on it and rolled his eyes as he collected the others and put them in his briefcase.

“Perfect, I represent you now,” the badger said. “My first question is; are you all out of your damn minds? Because I feel like I could make a pretty good case for insanity at this point in time.”

“I take it that you’ve already been informed of our situation,” Alkali stated, the badger nodding. “If we could explain, Mr… uh,”

Before Alkali could go back to the card that he had been given the lawyer waved his hand in dismissal. “Just call me Boozy,” the badger said. “Now to answer your question yes, I have been informed of your situation and was asked to review if there was some sort of legal way to get you out of this.”

There was a brief silence that caused the others to look back at him in slight confusion. “…well?” Xander asked. “Is there?”

“No,” Boozy replied simply. “You’re all screwed if this ever sees the light of day, much less the inside of the courtroom.”

There was once more a moment of pause from all of them as they just looked slightly dumbfounded at what appeared to be the end of Boozy’s statement. “Well, I’m glad that you were able to give us all that wonderful insight,” Alkali said as he made his way over towards the door. “Not quite sure why you couldn’t have just e-mailed us that good news but I’m sure you have to get going to wherever you need to be next.”

“That’s not why I’m here ferret,” Boozy replied as he pulled out other datapads from his briefcase and gave them to him. “Since you are being charged with crimes against a megacorporation, under the fair business and usage act and corporation civil transparency bill that was just passed a few years ago you are able to gather materials to propagate your own defense. It only extends to the records that involve you… but considering the skillset of your little group I figure you might want it.”

As Alkali looked at the datapad in confusion he suddenly found it gone from his hands, glancing up to see Draggor looking at it. “You got us a doorway into their mainframe,” the demon said excitedly. “I can use this to bypass their exterior firewalls and slip in between their server connections. That’s genius.”

“That’s what they pay me for,” the badger replied as he walked over to each of them and handed them a different datapad. “I’ve been told that you have some sort of secret information or something of that nature that was sent to you that kicked this whole thing off, if you can prove that this would be damaging to KatazCorp then you might qualify for protected status and you might not see the inside of a jail cell. Since you’re going after a megacorp however you got to make sure its airtight… none of this works if that skunk can wiggle his way out of it.”

Alkali nodded and shook the badger’s hand. “Thank you Boozy,” the ferret stated. “We owe you one.”

“You actually owe Uncle Kage several,” the badger said as he grabbed his briefcase and walked out of the hotel room. “Don’t call me!”

The door slammed shut and left the others just looking at one another as Serathin sat up in the bed. “He seemed nice,” he stated as he tossed the datapad he had been handed aside. “Smelled like bagels for some reason.”

“So, if we’re going to get out of this without going to jail or getting killed we still need to figure out the file and what this mysterious figure is trying to tell us about it,” Xander said as he also tossed the data pad onto the nearby night stand. “Which means we’re somehow going to have to get to the old fusion plant without anyone noticing us while a manhunt is going on. Then we have to hope this data actually means something and we aren’t being put on a wild goose chase.”

“Well if we can find out what is going on in relation to KatazCorp I can use this access point to try and find out more information on it,” Draggor instructed them. “Right now if I tried to hack in I might have a minute or two to look for a needle in a haystack, but if we know what we’re looking for then we can narrow it down to something feasible. But the other problem is for me to get this to work I’m going to need a hardline access to the servers… which means we’d have to sneak into the KatazCorp building itself somehow.”

“One problem at a time,” Alkali stated simply. “Now I can call Jake Bunny again and get us a ride no problem, especially since I helped him out of a tough spot some time ago, but we better rest up and do it at night… and we’re going to have to be ready for anything.”

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The group waited for night to fall before they set out again, once more being picked up by the rabbit behind the wheel of a different vehicle before being driven to their destination. Though the trip through the city was very harrowing for the five it appeared that their driver had thought of a simple and elegant solution for the problem of them being noticed, the five of them riding in the back of a limousine with tinted windows through the city streets. Once they had gotten to the outskirts of the city they switched rides to a van that Jake had placed there ahead of time; with the change of venue not only did it make them not stand out once more driving along the highway but also helped to shake any potential tails that they might have. With the moon looming overhead and nothing around them but forest for miles it was a strangely peaceful moment in this otherwise hectic event.

The abandoned fusion plant had been built in the nearby mountainous area about twenty miles outside of the city, the planners picking the area for safety reasons, but when they discovered seismic instability in the region they moved the entire thing core and all to a new spot near the bay. Since it would have cost just as much to demolish the complex structure those involved in the move decided instead to just let the building sit and fester. With it being so far outside the city it was rarely visited, especially since besides the threat of collapse from a tremor there was a protective zoning order put into place that rendered the building unlawful to enter.

As they turned the corner on the final stretch of road the first thing they saw was the cooling towers, which were still completely intact along with most of the rest of the structure. Had there not been vines and leaves growing over everything one might have thought that it was still running as the van pulled into the parking lot. Jake informed them that he would move to the north lot and meet them there, and if anything went wrong to just come running and he would pick them up on the way out. The five of them gave him a nod and a wave as he drove off, leaving them in the dark parking lot with nothing but their equipment and the moon overhead to give them light.

“So, do you think that they could have picked a spookier pace for this meeting?” Zen asked as they began to walk to the front entrance.

“At least if we get murdered here our screams won’t wake anyone,” Xander added, a slight smirk appearing on his muzzle. “I hear that can get rather annoying.”

The others just rolled their eyes or smirked also as they continued to move forward, eventually getting inside the main building and gazing around. The inside space was bigger than they expected… and this was just the lobby of it. “Doesn’t look like there is going to be anything as far as an arrow pointing the way,” Alkali stated as they heard their footsteps echo in the room, his eyes glancing back and forth between two signs that pointed in opposite directions informing them of the wings of the building they were in. “I think we’re going to have to split up I think, each side take a wing.”

The others agreed and tried to figure out which side would take which person. Since Alkali was the one that had gotten the initial exposure with this creature, he decided he would stay here in case they were waiting for him to be alone. With Xander’s augmented eyes he would be the leader of one group while Zen had come equipped with a set of night-vision googles that would make him the other. With no actual power flowing through the building both Draggor and Serathin admitted that they wouldn’t be very useful, so they split Draggor with Xander and Zen with Serathin since they knew one another the best. Both groups made sure to have a commlink with one another as well as Alkali, and they would make sure to check in with the ferret so that everyone was on the same page before the two groups went to their respective wings to begin the hunt.

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Xander and Draggor found themselves exploring what appeared to be the core area and control room for the fusion plant. As they looked around it was clear that everything from consoles to equipment had been taken over to the new plant with not so much as a wrench left behind. There was also nothing that indicated there was anyone else but them that has visited in years, not even footprints in the dust other than their own as they walked through it themselves. Both the dragon and the demon were quickly becoming discouraged as they walked through the maintenance area that led to the core room, eventually getting to the steel bulkhead that would have separated the fusion core from the rest of the plant. When they both attempted to try and get it open they found that even with Xander’s cybernetics he couldn’t it to budge.

“Must be rusted shut,” Draggor commented.

“That’s more than rusted,” Xander replied as he shook out his metal arm. “Maybe it’s been welded, but even I can crack one of those easily enough too. I want to say that there some sort of magnetic lock active because it made my arm feel tingly when I touched the metal.”

“Probably to prevent people from attempting to do what we were about to,” the demon said with a chuckle. “I’m going to check out the control room and see if there might be a note from our secret date if you want to keep fiddling with that.”

The dragon just waved him off and looked around for something to try and pry open the door with as Draggor went further down into the hallway and down into another room that was marked as the core’s control center. When he looked inside he saw that unlike the other areas they had searched this place was full of consoles and computer equipment, which was surprising given how expensive it all looked. Why would they take all the maintenance equipment and leave the computers, the demon wondered to himself as he began to walk around to check them out. He soon found himself even more shocked as he found one in the back corner that was not only on but still able to process commands.

Draggor immediately found a chair that was the least dirty and connected his backpack rig to the console itself. After finding a compatible system he used his own programs to hack into it, though as he breezed through the security algorithms he realized that this station wasn’t locked down at all. A fusion reactor with a control room that wasn’t protected from cyberattacks? It was certainly a strange sight as he took to the keyboard and began to type in commands to try and get a feel for the new system.

When he attempted to get on his commlink to try and reach the others to tell them what he found the screen was completely frozen, a problem he had never had before as he tapped harder on the screen in order to try and get it to work. Failing that he decided that since he didn’t need his rig to utilize the core screen he unplugged it, which caused not only his commlink to work once more but for the screen he had been working on to flicker and pop. At first he demon was worried that the sudden disconnect had caused a malfunction in the core system, but the screen quickly seemed to stabilize… before starting to play a cartoon about a skunk that he had seen before.

Draggor watched as this one had a lot of the same properties as the one that they had witnessed before, though it seemed to be much longer as he watched the nonsensical silliness that played in front of him. What was the meaning of this, the demon wondered as he found himself continuing to watch, why was there this message on the screen of a core control room panel? Was this the work of the mysterious stranger that they had been moving hell and earth in order to meet? Even though he had so many questions running around in his head all the demon could do was just sit there and continue to watch…

Meanwhile Xander continued to attempt to figure out how to open this door, scratching his head as he looked at the pipe that he had just bent in half in order to try and get it to open. As he tossed the piece of scrap aside and looked at his commlink time he knew that he should probably catch up with Draggor, especially since he had been in that room for nearly half an hour. He just wanted one more attempt with the door, one last chance to try and figure out the secrets that were on the other side as he gave it one last mighty tug. To his surprise the wheel turned so easily that it caused the dragon to tumble head over heels onto the floor with a loud thud.

After getting up and quickly looking around to make sure no one saw that Xander turned the door handle the rest of the way and it swing open. When he peeked through he found a long, dark hallway that led to a similar bulkhead as the one that he had just opened, and as he began to walk in his eyes suddenly picked something up in a spectrum that only his cybernetics would have been able to detect. When he got close to the spot he saw the markings were not only fresh but they were in the form of an arrow… an arrow only he could detect. He was suddenly reminded of the fortune cookie that he had gotten, it seemed like ages ago since then but the words were still fresh in his mind. Follow the arrows and he would get some sort of upgrade, something that the dragon definitely liked the sound of as he continued to move forward.

As Xander looked back he saw that the other door was still open, which gave him some relief since he knew that if Draggor came back out looking for him he could see where he had went as he got to the other side. Unlike the other door this bulkhead slid open easily on the first try, allowing him to get inside the core room to search it. “Well, I’m not a fusion plant engineer,” he said as he looked around the empty room, save for a spherical indent in the metal floor. “But this doesn’t look right at all.”

Though the room itself seemed like it might be a good place to put in a fusion core sphere, what caught Xander’s attention were the walls. From what he knew about power plants there needed to be some place for all the energy to go, yet there were no pipes, no wires, no outlets, and nothing that would have even begun to signify that they were putting something in there. All that he found was a metal floor, concrete walls, and a few lights in the ceiling that illuminated the space.

Just as he was about to head back out he suddenly felt a familiar tingle once more, but this time it was in his cybernetic legs as he felt himself no longer able to move. It was like he had suddenly become glued to the floor, and when he attempted to pull one of them up with his hands he lost his balance and fell to his knees. Almost immediately panic began to set in as he wondered if this was some sort of trap, something that KatazCorp or someone of that nature had set just so that they could get him and his group as he found his metal hand stuck to the floor as well. But as he waited for commandos to come storming in or possibly some sniveling peon in a suit to gloat over him he soon saw the next person to walk through the door was neither of them.

“Whew…” Xander said as he saw the familiar visage of Draggor poking his head out from the other bulkhead. “You came at the right time… oh! Whatever you do don’t bring your backpack in here, this entire floor is magnetized or something.”

The demon looked down at it and then hopped forward, his organic body easily sliding along the surface as he walked towards the dragon. “You got yourself in quite the predicament here,” Draggor stated with a chuckle as he moved forward, still grinning as he got closer. “I wonder what you’re going to owe me in order to get you out of this jam?”

“Just don’t say that it’ll cost me an arm and a leg,” Xander grumbled as he continued to half-heartedly try and wiggle himself free. “I’ve heard that joke so many times from Alkali that-“

The dragon’s words were cut short as he suddenly felt electricity race through his body, causing his entire body to shudder as his cybernetics sensed the surge and immediately shut down. As Xander fell forward his eyes were able to capture the last moments before he lost consciousness, seeing the demon standing over him with a ceramic stun gun in his hand. “Don’t worry Xander,” Draggor said as he leaned down, still grinning as he got close to him. “I’m sure that we can think of something…”

Chapter 6:

At the same time Zen and Serathin continued to move about the other wing of the fusion reactor plant, which appeared to be some sort of research and development department they had put in so they could continue to study the physics of their fusion core. Though there were a few things scattered here and there; some test tubes, a few calipers, even a microscope that Zen had found in a drawer, there was nothing that indicated that the person they were looking for was there. The excitement of wandering around a strange building at night had quickly worn off and even the possibility of meeting the mysterious stranger that had brought them there in the first place wasn’t even getting them excited anymore. Serathin in particular was bored; though not having the constant pressure of the matrix in the area was a nice reprieve, there was nothing else to do and he was missing the constant stimuli.

“I’m starting to wonder if maybe the ferret was right and their little group was taken on a wild goose chase,” the fox said as he rifled through an old safety data manual.

“They better not have,” Serathin replied. “I did not become wanted by a megacorp just because someone wanted to play a joke on those three. If this whole thing turns into someone laughing and saying they fooled us I’m going to murder them.”

Zen chuckled at that before he got a serious look on his face. “By the way, do you have any sort of weapon on your other than those batons?” he asked, the sabrewolf shaking his head. “Here, given the nature of what we’ve gone up against you’re probably going to need something like this.”

Serathin was told to hold out his hand, and when he did he suddenly found something heavy placed in it. He looked down to see that he had been given a pistol, something that caused the hybrid a bit of concern as he checked to see if it was loaded. It certainly made the situation far less boring as he attempted to hold the gun just like Zen was as they made their way through the old plant, trying to find something there that would warrant the need for such firepower. As they explored deeper into the research section Zen paused and told Serathin to stop before leaning down and examining the floor.

“What is it?” Serathin asked.

“This metal,” Zen replied as he got back up. “It’s different than the rest of the rooms that we had been in before.”

“What?” the hybrid asked as he looked down. “This looks like the same as the rest of the floor we’ve been walking on.”

“Ah, but it’s the grade of metal that has gotten my curiosity my saber-toothed friend,” the fox said as he reached down and knocked on it. “The other areas were typical corrugated metal floors, rust resistant but otherwise unremarkable. This… this is surgical steel.”

“So… I’m guessing there’s a difference?” Serathin asked once more.

“It’s like you floored most of a house in shag carpeting and then decided to do one room in velvet,” Zen explained. “Trust me, I know my metals, and this is a significant change. There has to be something here that they require such flooring for that they didn’t need in the other areas.”

Zen and Serathin both carefully moved their way into the next room, but what they found was just as unremarkable as the others. A few boxes, some old supplies that someone was either too lazy to move or just forgot about, and what appeared to be an old television in the corner. It looked like a normal break room… but Zen continued to have them search the area to see if there was anything hidden within. That was when they started to see other things; signs of life including a cot, canned food, and other things that looked fairly recent.

As Serathin moved on to check out a door that was marked as the lavatory it suddenly flew open, almost hitting him in the face as moved back just in time to avoid it. Zen spun around as he heard the noise and saw a wolf run out and make a dash straight for the door they had just entered from. The fox was quicker however and he got to it to slam it shut, only for the panicked creature to climb a set of shelves instead and push open a hatch that the two hadn’t seen before. With their only lead in this place disappearing Zen quickly ran over and practically jumped up the shelves in order to give chase with Serathin right behind him.

The hatch had led to the outside of one of the cooling towers, the two of them watching the wolf scrambling up the ladder onto the catwalk. They sighed and quickly ran forward to give chase, with Zen once more taking the lead while Serathin came up from behind. The fleeing man wasn’t just content to go up one set of ladders either, as they continued to climb up and around the concrete structure until eventually they found themselves on the catwalk that bordered the outside ring of the cooling tower. With nowhere else to clime the two realized they had their opportunity, Zen going along the left side while Serathin took the right.

Eventually they got around to where the wolf was, noting the distinctive markings in his fur as they slowly tried to approach in an attempt not to spook him. “Hey there buddy,” Serathin called out, standing as still as he could. “What’s your name?”

“My… my name?” the lupine creature replied, looking down as though he had to think about it before he responded. “I’m… Poker…”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Poker,” Zen stated, leaning back as the sudden inclusion of another voice caused the one in the middle to jump slightly. “Listen, we’re not here to hurt you, we’re just responding to your message. You sent us out here to save you, right?”

As Poker looked at him in confusion Zen looked past to see Serathin shaking his head. “The one we’re looking for is a skunk, not a wolf,” the hybrid said before getting Poker’s attention back to him, finding the lupine’s eyes had gone wide at the word skunk. “Like Zen said, we’re not here to harm you in any way, we just want to know what’s going on. Have you been living here by yourself all this time?”

“No… no, not alone,” Poker replied, still looking frantically back and forth between the two like a caged animal. “He’s here, he’s always here…” the two looked at him in confusion as he began to poke his head. “They wanted to put him in here, but then didn’t, then… they left me here… with him…”

“I can see that you’ve suffered something awful,” Serathin continued as he nodded to Zen and they began to approach once more. “Why don’t you go ahead and come back down with us out of this wind and cold and we can talk about it? We have a few friends that I think would like to talk to you.”

The thought seemed to calm down the lupine some, though they could clearly see he was still quite on edge both figuratively and literally. “Friends…” he said as he looked down. “Thought they… they were my friends… they were not…”

“Come on friend,” Zen said as he held out his hand to the wolf. “Let us bring you back to the city, you can tell us all about what happened and maybe we can get you some help.”

Serathin froze in position as he allowed Zen to try and bring Poker in, who after some hesitation seemed to warm up to the offer. As he took a step forward however the piece of catwalk he had been standing on let out a loud snap and the wolf suddenly plunged downwards as the floor gave way underneath him. Both Serathin and Zen made a dive for him but by the time they reached the edge the wolf had already disappeared into the darkness below their field of vision. The two looked at one another as his loud shouts became more distant before they also vanished, leaving them on the rickety scaffolding looking down at the side of the cooling tower with only the wind howling around them.

“…he might be alright,” Serathin stated, the fox looking up at him incredulously. “What? The cooling tower slopes downwards and gets less steep near the bottom, maybe it helped control his fall and he rolled down to safety.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Zen said as he carefully stood up himself. “Come on, let’s get down from here before we test that theory of yours out for ourselves. I also want to give that room he was hiding in another through look around, something tells me we missed an important piece of evidence that linked that poor soul to whatever was going on around here after the fusion plant was shut down.”

It took a few minutes before the two safely made their way down the scaffolding of the cooling tower, not wanting to follow the wolf’s lead as they got back down to the hatch and carefully made their way back down the shelves. After closing it back up they did a far more through search of the room then they had done before, Zen looking through the boxes while Serathin examined the back of the television. “What do we have here,” the hybrid said as he found a loose panel in the appliance and opened it up, revealing something inside of it that caused him to pause. “They’re… goggles?”

“Let me see,” Zen said as he looked at them, noting the green tint of the lenses before putting them up to his face. “They look kind of like my night vision pair, but there’s something different about them.” Just as Serathin was about to ask for them back the fox suddenly stopped him and pointed at one of the panels on the floor. “Hey, that one is glowing.”

Serathin just shrugged and went over to the one that Zen pointed out for him, and as he put his hand on it to try and see if it was pressure activated he suddenly felt a bristle travel up his spine. It was a Matrix signature, faint but definitely present, and something that shouldn’t be in a plant with no electricity. He poked around the system for a bit before he found the release lever, which caused not only that panel but several others to slide back and form into a stairwell that led downwards. As Zen continued to look around with the goggles he continued to point out things that he saw, which Serathin could sense were other Matrix signatures.

Before they could take too long to marvel at a pair of googles that could see Network signals they found something at the bottom of those stairs that caused their jaws to drop in awe. An entire laboratory had been set up, and judging from the darkness that enshrouded one of the walls it was possibly bigger than the entire wing that they had just explored. Though it looked just as abandoned as the area upstairs there were far more signs of life, including a wall of servers that appeared to be operational as well as several consoles that were still running. When both of them took turns looking through the googles they saw that the place was brilliantly lit, which the technomancer confirmed using his senses as they started to rummage around this new area.

While it hadn’t been unheard of to have secret labs and such under buildings, even in the megacity, this was the first time that it appeared a fusion plant had been built on top of it as cover. As they began to dig through the notes on the consoles that were still functioning it appeared that a meteor had landed here during the megacity boom, and when the government went over to investigate they found bizarre minerals and massive energy spikes that mimicked matrix signals. “That’s why they built this place as a fusion plant,” Serathin stated as he looked through the files. “Not only did they have to cover up the energy readings but they also wanted to make sure that no one else snooped around here, or if they did they could use the fact they were caught in a fusion plant to make them disappear.”

“So Alkali and the others were led here to find this place?” Zen said as he continued to look around, tossing the googles to Serathin so that he could investigate the servers while he went through some leftover data pads. “It looks like they were basically developing alien technology with what they found from the meteor… but it doesn’t say anything about why they abandoned the place and what happened with the rest of the meteorite.”

“Maybe they used it all up,” Serathin suggested, causing the fox to scoff as he went over to the primary console in the middle of the room that was connected to the server bank itself and began to fiddle with it. “So I wonder if these goggles were part of the alien tech they developed or something they did in order to figure out what the alien stuff did.” As Serathin continued to wander further down into the area with all the servers he continued to follow the lines of matrix signal that were on the roof until they caused his head to tilt back down, where he saw something that caused his jaw to drop. He slowly took pulled up the googles as he saw that in the middle of the new room he had wandered into there was a skeleton sitting in what looked like an electric chair, his hands and feet cuffed to it with a number of wires sticking out.

The draconic sabrewolf stuck out his tongue at the sight and was about to call back to Zen on what he found when he noticed something that was stuck on the remains of cloth that looked like it might have been a lab coat. As he reached out and grabbed it he jumped back slightly when the skull shifted forward, caught only by the metal bowl that had been secured on his head. Once he was sure that it wouldn’t move again Serathin once more took his hand and grabbed onto the piece of plastic that was hanging on by a metal clip. He gave it a small tug to try and pull it off, and when that didn’t work he gave the next one a little more muscle to dislodge it.

Just as the badge came loose in his hands the rest of the skeleton disintegrated right before Serathin’s eyes, causing the hybrid to jump back slightly and look around guiltily as it became a pile of bones that surrounded the chair. When it looked karma wasn’t going to come out and bite him he relaxed and looked at the identification he had just pulled, frowning when he saw the name on it as well as the picture. It couldn’t be, he thought to himself as he walked over to where the lights were still on in order to get a better look. As he continued to stare at it he called over to Zen to see if he wanted to take a look at what he had found, only to find the fox not responding to him.

When Serathin looked over he saw Zen sitting in front of the console, staring at something at the screen that was flickering and moving about. When he said his name once more it appeared that the fox was continuing to ignore him, which caused the draconic sabrewolf to roll his eyes and start to walk over. As he did so he saw something that stopped him dead in his tracks, quickly pulling down the goggles on his head to reveal something that shocked him once more. From the screen that Zen was looking at, the lenses preventing him from seeing the image of the cartoon skunk that was dancing around on it, he saw a familiar avatar form push its way out of the console and begin to drift towards the one watching. Serathin gasped as he saw the spectral skunk begin to push his hands against the ears of the fox, sinking into his skull as their eyes continued to lock on with a gaze that only the sabrewolf seemed to be able to see.

“Screw that,” Serathin said as he took the gun and pointed it at the screen, trying not to flinch as he fired at the computer. On the third bullet he managed to actually hit what he was shooting at and the digital specter let out a shriek and fizzled out before disappearing completely, the hybrid looking at the gun he had just fired in slight awe. “Huh, that actually worked…”

Zen seemed to remain out of it for a few seconds before he blinked and seemed to come to his senses, shaking his head as he looked around before looking at Serathin. “Serathin?” the fox asked, his head turning back and forth between the sabrewolf and the still sparking console. “What just happened?”

“I think you just unwittingly found a big piece of the puzzle,” Serathin replied as he pulled off the goggles. “I may have found one too, but first are you alright? From what I saw with these things something was definitely happening to you.”

Zen turned back towards the console once more and looked at it in contemplation. “I’m… not sure,” he said, Serathin once more looking though the goggles just to make sure the bullets were enough to banish the creature as the fox continued to think. “Actually, when I first saw you after I snapped out of it I had the incredible urge to point my gun at you and make you sit down in some sort of chair… but after that the details are fuzzy and I can’t remember anything else, and even that initial reaction is quickly fading.”

“Well if it’s the chair I’m thinking of I’m glad you didn’t act on that impulse,” Serathin replied before his eyes widened, his thoughts clicking into place as he looked down at the badge he was holding and then back where he had gotten it from. “I think I got it! Well, not all of it, most of it… maybe just some of it, but enough to know that Alkali and the others are in danger!”

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Alkali sighed as he continued to wait in the lobby, wishing more and more he had gone with one of the two groups instead of sticking around to make sure he could catch anyone that might come through this way. So far the only thing he had seen going through the area was a bat that had somehow gotten in and then just as mysteriously gotten out again. That left him with very little to do as he wandered around the receptionist desk area. Like everything else in the building it was completely covered in dust and there was nothing on it except for an old computer, a visitor’s ledger, and the employee directory for the fusion plant. With nothing else to read and not wanting to use his commlink to stream a movie and miss the guy.

Instead he started to flip through the papers on the desk, starting with the visitor’s ledger that only had two pages filled up before they moved the entire fusion plant. He tossed it in the trash and then moved on to the employee directory, which was just as boring but at least had pictures of people along with their names and occupations. Before he could get too far however he heard the crackle of his commlink come to life, hearing the sounds of Serathin and Zen on the other end. Something was distorting their voices though and as they attempted to continue to try and communicate with him his attention was suddenly drawn to the computer that had somehow come to life. He looked at it curiously as the screen flickered for a few seconds, then came fully online with… a skunk cartoon?

As he continued to stare at it had could heard the sounds of the two on his commlink shouting, but he found himself turning it off as his eyes continued to remain fixated on the screen. After a few minutes of watching, wondering what was about to happen next, he heard the sound of something moving behind him. When he spun around in the chair he saw a familiar face behind him, the glowing avatar of the skunk standing there just like when they were inside the Matrix. The ferret wasn’t sure what to say and found himself staring, which only seemed to cause the skunk to giggle.

“Thank you so much for finding me here,” the avatar said. “I wish that I didn’t have to have you jump through hoops in order to try and find me, but I’m afraid that the situation required it. My name is Firr, and I’ve been trapped here by the one you probably know as Kataze, the founder of KatazCorp.”

“Wait, your name is Firr?” Alkali asked. “As in the same thing as all the bio pods and the Matrix Immersion nodes are called?”

“A cruel joke by my former partner,” Firr replied, the avatar disappearing for a second before reappearing right next to him. “We pioneered the field of Full Immersion Virtual Reality, him as a brilliant hardware technician while I worked on the programming as a Technomancer. I don’t think I have to explain to you what a Technomancer is, do I?”

Alkali found himself shaking his head and he saw the skunk smiling before moving on. “Good, then you know what my abilities are,” Firr continued to explain. “One day, after we had pioneered the current technology that you see everyone using today we decided to try and move onto the next phase of our research. But… Kataze betrayed me, lured me to this place, and then trapped me in an electronic prison of his own design.”

“Are… are you sure that he did it intentionally?” Alkali asked. “Maybe it was a mistake.”

“Oh no,” Firr replied, his avatar crackling slightly. “This was pre-meditated, the technology that you see here was planned and built months in advance. But that’s not the worst thing, not by a long shot, you see… he was also developing technology that could enslave the metahuman mind.”

Alkali gasped slightly at that, the skunk nodding as the ferret covered his mouth slightly. “Is that what the launch of this new product of his is?” the ferret asked. “Some sort of mind control device?”

“The launch was a farce from the word go,” Firr said angrily. “All he wanted was as many eyes glued to as many screens as he could so that he could release the programming that would change the minds of all those who happened to watch… it’s the same programming that I sent you, the one that allowed you to meet those who helped facilitate our meeting.” When the skunk avatar saw confusion cross the face of the ferret he sighed and shook his head. “Tell me, do you always happen to go to that ramen stand or did fate put you in the path of that technomancer?”

Alkali thought back to the day that he had first met Serathin, which was also the day that the hit squad was about to kill him. They had never really gone to that particular restaurant before; in fact he had never really even thought about it until that day. “Are you trying to tell me that your file made us go to that place?” Alkali finally asked. “That you did that all through an email attachment?”

“As well as the time,” Firr admitted. “I’ve had you under my watch for some time because I knew that you would be the one to help me bring Kataze down, and luckily for me that hybrid is quite meticulous on when he gets his lunch in both location and time. All I had to do was bring you two together.”

“And the hit squad?” Alkali asked, his tone suddenly accusatory. “Did you send them to kill us to in order to help bring us together?”

“No, that was all Kataze,” Firr replied. “I had implanted the suggestion in your mind to follow the technomancer and ask him for help, when I saw that my signal had been traced despite my best efforts I knew I had to warn you somehow and used what limited power I had to hijack the fortune cookie maker that place had to print out the messages to you.”

Alkali felt his head spinning more then when he tried going full immersion for the first time, shaking it as he tried to wrap his head around what was being said to him. It seemed like something out of a science fiction novel as he continued to hear Firr talk about how Kataze was about to bring the whole of the city, and then eventually the world, under his heel using the technology that they had invented. The ferret could feel deep down that this was something they had to take care of, especially if the skunk was able to pull their strings enough to get them here. Even though there was something that wasn’t quite adding up in his mind there was definitely enough evidence here to make sure that they would prevent the other skunk from taking over.

“Alright, so we stop your partner from taking everyone over,” Alkali said. “How do we do that?”

“Well the first thing we’re going to have to do is break me out of here,” Firr explained. “I’ve got that part mostly under control, so what you’re going to need to do is take out Serathin and Zen.” Alkali furrowed his brows at that and was about to ask why when the avatar beat him to the punch. “I’ve recently learned that they have sold you out to Kataze, not only siding with him in his attempts to rule everything but also avoiding any further legal consequences from their actions.”

“Those bastards,” Alkali said gritted teeth. “I’ll make them pay for this.”

“I’m sure you will,” Firr said, flashing him a smile before getting serious once again. “Luckily for you I’ve managed to get control of a few places in this facility, mainly the reactor control room. What I need you to do is lure them there so that they can be disarmed, then you should find a ceramic stun gun in the control room that-“

The skunk was suddenly cut short as a sharp and intense pain suddenly seemed to form in Alkali’s shoulder, the ferret crying out as he spun around in the chair and hit the floor…

Serathin looked with wide eyes as he watched Alkali hit the ground while clutching his shoulder, quickly taking the handgun he had just fired and pushing it into the fox next to him. Zen just rolled his eyes and took it, then used it to shoot out the screen they had saw the ferret staring at while practically drooling. “I mean… it technically worked,” Serathin said as he gestured over at the moaning ferret before sighing. “I have a first aid kit I can treat him with.”

As the hybrid quickly rushed over to treat the wound that he had caused Zen looked at the screen with the goggles that they had found, seeing that the skunk avatar that had practically sunk itself completely into the head of the one it had entranced was nowhere to be found. The computer itself was also completely toast, the bullet he had fired ripping right through the middle of it to disable the entity from going any further in his plan. That had just left the wounded man on the floor, which Serathin was quick to announce that the bullet had gone completely threw and it didn’t look like it hit anything important.

As Alkali asked what on earth happened Serathin began to explain that when they had attempted to call him through the commlinks and couldn’t get a hold of him they rushed to get to him because they feared he was in danger. Then… they came just in time to see someone shoot him and run off, but he was so fast that he and Zen had no chance of catching him. That was when they saw the screen was on and displaying the thing that they were coming to warn him about and Zen shot out the computer to prevent him from falling deeper into the clutches of the one that was trying to enthrall him. Though his story made little in the way of sense when it came to who shot it him it appeared that Alkali was in too much pain to put the pieces together, which caused Serathin to breathe a sigh of relief and Zen to just roll his eyes again.

Before the fox could say anything about it however, they heard the sound of tires squealing and he ran to the doors in time to see their driver peeling out of the parking lot. With the goggles on Zen quickly looked to see if there was any interference in the Matrix, and though he didn’t see anything happening in the front there was definitely a presence he saw that caused him to frown deeply. He tried to get out and flag Jake down, but it appeared he either didn’t see him or was focused on something else as he watched the vehicle disappear into the woods that the road ran through. After standing there for a few seconds in dismay he walked back inside to see that Serathin had managed to patch up the ferret he had accidently shot and gotten him back onto the chair.

“So can you explain to me again how I managed to get shot?” Alkali asked as he looked between the two with an angry glare.

“I… I think I already told you?” Serathin said with a nervous chuckle before putting on a more serious face. “We don’t have time for that anyway, we have bigger problems on our hands. It turns out the person that we’re looking for is actually-“.

“A technomancer skunk named Firr,” Alkali interrupted, causing the two to look at one another in a mixture of surprise and confusion.

“Well… did you know that I actually found Firr’s body down in the basement of this place?” Serathin continued. “It turns out he had somehow transferred-“

“Transferred his consciousness into a computer server beneath this place after he was tricked by his partner,” Alkali once more finished.

“Stop that!” Serathin said in a huff as he crossed his arms. “How do you know all this stuff anyway?”

“Firr… he told me,” Alkali said as he looked at the busted screen on the secretary’s desk. “He said that Kataze was going to try and enslave humanity and that we had to stop him.”

Zen just let out a small huh as Serathin rubbed his temples. “It appears it wasn’t going to take much to catch him up after all,” the fox said before looking back at Alkali. “Anything else that he might have mentioned to you before you got disconnected from him?”

As Alkali continued to think he remembered what Firr had said about the two of them, how they had betrayed him and the others in order to catch a deal with the other skunk and the anger that he felt because of that. He continued to think about it for a few seconds before he finally shook his head. “I think that was it,” the ferret stated before he looked around. “Hey, where is Xander and Draggor?”

“They left about a minute after we… found you like that,” Zen said begrudgingly, point a thumb behind him at the parking lot. “We think that they’ve been entranced by this Firr in order to try and take out Kataze. Of course if I was trapped here then I would probably be pretty mad myself.”

“I think we’re missing the bigger picture here,” Serathin stated. “Doesn’t anyone else find it a little strange that instead of just coming out and asking us to help them they decided to try and enthrall everyone using these screens? Not to mention if we hadn’t found these goggles I’d probably end up in the same place that Firr was in because Zen said that he felt the need to put me in that electric chair downstairs!”

“But I think the most important takeaway is that I didn’t… do that thing…” Zen rebutted. “Plus we have bigger problems on our hands, namely the fact that we’re about twenty miles out of town with no way back and in a matrix dead zone. So unless one of you can suddenly wish a car into existence we’re either stuck here or have to start walking…”

The fox trailed off as they suddenly started to see several black vans drive into the parking lot, four of them screeching to a stop before several heavily armed creature poured out of each one and set up a firing line aimed straight at them. All three of them jumped behind the receptionist’s desk as Alkali muttered that he was about to get shot again. For a while neither side moved, and though Zen held his shotgun Alkali told him to wait until they made the first move. At the moment they weren’t shooting at them, the last thing they needed to do was give them an excuse.

“So…” Serathin asked as he put his back to the desk. “Who wants to go and ask them for a ride?”

Chapter 7:

Jake watched as the black sedans that had been roaring up the road made a sudden turn into the fusion plant, the rabbit breathing a sigh of relief as he looked in the rearview mirror at Draggor and Xander. “You guys were right about them being right on our heels,” he said. “Another thirty seconds and they probably would have seen us driving off. It’s a shame that we had to leave Alkali and the others behind, are you sure that we shouldn’t go back and try to at least see if we can rescue them?”

“Unfortunately we have bigger fish to fry,” Draggor said as he looked down at his commlink, seeing that KatazCorp had once more announced that they were about to unveil their latest product and set up another countdown timer, this time scheduled for tomorrow. As the demon looked over at Xander the dragon continued to stare straight ahead, his eyes unblinking as they glowed with a red light. “They would want us to complete this mission though, right Xander?”

Xander found himself blinking as he looked around, suddenly realizing that he was in the car with Draggor and no one else as the words that the demon said caught up with him in his mind. “Uh… yeah,” he stated, still trying to get a bearing on his situation. “Super important that we do this. Which is…”

“We need to get to KatazCorp and upload a virus onto their servers that prevents them from releasing the programming that will bend an entire population to the will of the megacorp,” Draggor instructed him. “If we don’t then Kataze will rule the city without anyone even realizing it, and then he will move on to become the most powerful man in the world. There will be no one that he can’t influence, and we will all be slaves under him.”

“Yeah… yeah that is really bad,” Xander replied, unable to shake something from his thoughts as he continued to stare at Draggor. There was something about him standing there that seemed to be triggering his memory, like a smell or taste doing the same as he shook his head a few times. What made it worse that for some reason he had abandoned Alkali back there with the other two, something that he would have never done normally. Had what they found at that fusion plant become so important that they needed to risk it all in order to stop Kataze’s plans?

Yes… that was the resounding answer that echoed in his mind as the dragon felt his body stiffen slightly. Kataze had to pay for what he did, and for what he was about to do. To think that he trusted him… or wait, what? Xander didn’t even know the skunk other then the fact that he was trying to kill him for something that they had done. His gaze once more went back to the demon and he suddenly felt he was no longer driving in a car but strapped down to some seat, looking down to see electrode patched pressed against his cybernetics.

Draggor seemed to sense his anxiety and ran a hand down the back of the dragon’s neck, which immediately seemed to not only calm Xander down but also clear his mind of the pesky thoughts that he had been having that might delay him from his mission. They needed to get to that server before Kataze released the programming that he was going to use to enslave everyone. That was the only thing that he needed to focus on, the dragon repeating it like a mantra in his head as they continued to drive down the road…

Meanwhile Zen, Alkali, and Serathin continued to remain pinned down behind the desk, still waiting to see what those that had not only blockaded the front entrance but the way out of the parking lot as well. Even if they decided to try and leave through the back they would either have to try and brave their way through the mountains and woods or somehow sneak around the car that had blocked the main entrance to the fusion plant. With escape looking like less and less of an option Alkali decided to do what he did best and stood up with his good hand raised up in the air. The ferret flinched slightly when he heard several guns cocking, but when nothing happened he decided to test his luck and continue to walk towards the door with his hand still up in the air.

“You can put your hand down sir,” one of the men who was behind a car door said through his car’s speaker system. “We have someone that would like to speak with your group, if you could tell those that are still behind the desk to come out with their hands raised as well we can then have a conversation.”

Alkali looked back and saw that Serathin soon stood up as well with his hands raised, swallowing hard at all the red dot laser sights that were suddenly focused on his chest. When he was the only one he looked down and motioned for Zen to get up, and when he didn’t do that they argued with one another for a bit before finally the fox complied. Once Zen had put his guns carefully on the table he rose up with his hands in the air as well and the two of them walked forward. Once they were in the same position as Alkali they were also told they could put their hands down and then moved over to the back door of the car to open it.

The three watched as a husky in a nice suit was helped out, then given a walking stick that he tapped on the ground while walking towards him. It quickly became clear why they wanted to make sure that there was nothing that could happen to his one, since they would be unlikely to dodge any attacks that came their way. “A pleasure to meet you gentlemen,” the husky said as he extended his hand. “My name is Citrine, and from what I’ve heard in my briefing you three have met Firr.”

“Well, those two met Firr technically,” Zen said as he pointed to Alkali and Serathin. “I’ve just been taking along.”

Suddenly the blind canine shifted forward and took a deep whiff of each of them, all of them leaning back as he did so before he returned back to his neutral position. “The sabrewolf and the fox are relatively clean,” Citrine announced before pointing his cane directly at the ferret. “This one though is heavily under the influence; you’re going to need to perform a cleansing immediately.”

Both Zen and Serathin took a big step to the side, leaving Alkali standing there alone as one of the men in suits went over to the side of the husky holding a wooden box. Though Zen and Alkali had no idea what was inside Serathin could feel the telltale tingle of Matrix energy in whatever was inside that box, which turned out to be a pair of gloves. “After we had discovered that Firr had picked up a rather innate ability with exposure to the material of the meteor that KatazCorp had requisitioned we quickly developed… countermeasures to such things.” Citrine explained as he put on the gloves. “The first was the goggles that Zen is currently wearing, designed to not only see the digital imprint of the technomancer but also to see if anything had been influenced by his programming.”

“So the cartoons that Alkali saw that Firr sent him,” Serathin stated. “That was something that Firr had done to influence him?”

“Correct,” Citrine confirmed, flexing his knuckles in the leather gloves. “Of course as I’m sure you know once malicious code gets into a program, even one as complex as the metahuman mind, it’s almost impossible to target. Instead we have to use more of a… brute force option.”

By the time Alkali realized what that meant the canine had already closed the distance between them and one of those fists connected directly with his stomach. Though Serathin could only sense what was happening Zen, still wearing the goggles, watched as something long and thin like a glowing tentacle of light came out of the ferret’s body that Citrine quickly reached around with his other hand and grabbed before pulling out. As Alkali fell to his knees more of the object came out of his body until the fox could see that it was actually the tail of a skunk. The husky took both hands and gripped the tail tightly, then ripped it apart and caused the energy to dissolve away as the ferret was left wheezing.

“Why… am I getting… hurt… all the time…” Alkali said between gasps as he rolled on the parking lot floor. “First shot… now punched…”

“I do apologize,” Citrine replied as he carefully took off the gloves and placed them back into the box. “If there were a gentler way to get rid of Firr’s influence in someone I would have come up with it. Alas all my time studying such an illusive creature has only wielded moderate gains in understanding him.”

“Alright, can I just call a time out on all of this?” Serathin asked as he went up to the husky, stepping over the ferret who wheezed out that he needed a drink before standing right in front of the canine. “We all just got our butts kicked by some former technomancer current avatar that may or may not have influenced at least one of our group. From a score of one to screwed just how much trouble are we all in right now?”

“If Firr has managed to escape from his prison?” Citrine stated simply. “I would put the meter towards screwed. But we still have a chance to make things right, if you will help your friend get into the car I will explain things along the way.”

Zen and Serathin quickly nodded and ran back to pick up the still groaning ferret, ushering him over to one of the larger vans that Citrine had also hopped into. As they got inside they saw a familiar face sitting there as well next to the canine. “Poker?!” Both Serathin and Zen said as they looked on in shock. “How did you survive the fall?”

“Easy really,” Poker replied as everyone else piled into their respective cars. “The cooling tower was at a slight decline and I managed to use that to break my fall and roll down until I got to the bottom.”

“Ha!” Serathin shouted as he pointed at Zen, the doors closing to start their caravan back to the city.

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The first glimmers of light began to appear over the horizon as Jake Bunny dropped Xander and Draggor off at the location they requested, the rabbit telling them that if they hear anything from Alkali that they would give them all call. Their destination had been one that they normally wouldn’t have gone into, the towering skyscrapers of the city’s financial section looming over their heads as they began to make their plans for how they would storm the building. With the access that their lawyer had given them it would only take a few minutes to find what they were looking for, Draggor preparing his rig while Xander continued to focus on his task. Access the building, find the files, stop Kataze… it continued to ring throughout his head as he sat down in a nearby chair where the demon was working.

Suddenly Xander was transported once more, gasping loudly as he found his arms and legs completely bound to a solid metal chair while Draggor continued to stick some sort of wires on his body. “Draggor, what are you doing?” the dragon demanded as he tried to look around, only to find his neck completely bound as well. “You know me, I’m your friend!”

“Of course you’re my friend,” the demon replied, his voice almost a monotone as Xander flinched from something being pushed into the implant in his head. “Which is why I’m doing this, because I want all my friends to get along. Plus you then get to not only get to help someone that’s been trapped down here for so long but you also get to prevent the tyranny of Kataze from spreading throughout the entire world.”

Tyranny? Kataze? Xander didn’t even know what the demon was talking about as he attempted to struggle in his bindings. This wasn’t right, he wasn’t supposed to be here, but… he was, and this was what had to happen in order to make sure that everything went to plan. This was what Firr needed, a way out… and he was going to give it to him because he knew that was the right thing to do.

Once more there was the feel of a hand stroking the back of his neck and Xander was calmed once more. Draggor was right, the dragon realized as he settled back into his mantra, soon they would be done with their mission and Kataze’s reign of terror would be over. That will teach them…

“We have a problem,” Draggor said suddenly, bringing Xander’s attention to the screen that the demon was showing him. “It appears that our friends have caught a ride and are heading back to the city in an expedited manner, along with some new friends of their own. If it’s them then we’re going to have a serious problem on our hands.”

“Figures…” Xander replied with a scowl, punching his palm with his fist so hard that his organic side began to bleed. “Do we still have the contacts of those thugs that we stole that shipment of computer parts from?”

“Of course,” Draggor replied. “I always make sure to keep the numbers of my enemies nearby. Why?”

“Call them up,” Xander said, his eyes glowing red as an evil grin spread across his muzzle. “I think we just found out who stole their shipment.”

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“So let me make sure that I got this all correct,” Alkali said as he leaned forward towards the husky. “You were part of a secret government project that had built a fake fusion reactor over a meteor that you then exploited to try and find new materials, and when you found out that part of the effects of this new mineral was complete immersion you sold the rights to KatazCorp where Kataze and Firr gained access to the meteor. Then you found out that Kataze and Firr had also found that the meteor also had intense hypnotic properties, and when both of them had aspirations of using said properties to try and take over the world you tricked Kataze into trapping Firr but couldn’t stop him before now?”

“You basically got it,” Citrine stated as Poker poured him a drink. “We formed this organization to try and stop Kataze at all costs without revealing the existence of Firr, who proved to be the far more dangerous one of the two.”

The car grew deadly quiet for a second as the three thought of the ramifications of what happened, before Zen raised his hand. “Question,” he asked. “Why did Firr contact Alkali? I mean, I know he’s connected, but I can’t see how he would be able to help him.”

“Because Firr knew that Alkali wouldn’t come on his own,” Serathin said in realization, turning to the other two. “Don’t you see? Alkali was never Firr’s real target to begin with, he needed Xander’s cybernetics to piggyback his way out of the prison and into the city!”

“A devious plan to be sure,” Citrine stated. “And from what you and Zen have reported it appears that he was going to have you take his place in the prison so that if we came to investigate, I would still sense the presence of a technomancer… just the wrong one. Had you not found the goggles Poker left behind I fear for what might have happened to all of you, likely Zen and Alkali would be escorting your possessed friend along with Draggor before you gave him the keys to the kingdom.”

Though all three were visibly shaken from the entire ordeal it was Alkali that was hit the most. Before Citrine had gotten the digital corruption out of his system he realized that he had not only deeply mistrusted Zen and Serathin but realized he was also planning on making sure that they couldn’t interfere with Xander’s plans… which would have turned out to be Firr’s plans. They had gotten the wool pulled over their eyes, and were so focused on trying to beat out Kataze’s evil they didn’t see that the one they were trying to help was the same. In essence… they were dealing with two villains, and if either one of them wins then its game over for everyone else.

As they continued to drive to the city with the dawn rapidly approaching Zen had been staring out of the window in silent contemplation when he noticed that three SUV’s had come barreling down the road opposite them, which wouldn’t have been too much for concern except that as he continued to watch them he saw that they made a sharp u turn, hopped the divider, and then started to accelerate towards them. “We got company!” Zen shouted as he reached back and grabbed his duffel bag and pulled out a rather large rifle. “Brace yourselves.”

Poker quickly grabbed Citrine and pulled him down as the others did the same, just seconds before the windows in their car shattered from bullets hitting the sides of it. Since Zen knew the glass had been tempered they were using some sophisticated rounds, luckily the sides were more armored as they saw the internal panels bulge out from the impact of the bullets. While their vehicle stayed on the side of the road the one in front of them wasn’t so lucky, two of their tires blowing out which caused the entire thing to jackknife and do a roll down the highway. With the other cars being blocked they decided to scatter instead of try to drive out, which turned out to be a good decision as the marauders double backed and tossed a grenade in their prone vehicle.

As Alkali and the others dove down into the nearby ditch their car exploded, though Zen was quick to recover and return fire. Hey managed to hit one of the cars right in the front, which caused the explosive slug to detonate and the hood of the truck flipped up right in their face to expose the flaming engine. That seemed to be enough to allow the other car full of people to get out and begin to fire on the remaining two trucks that started to speed away for another pass. With a lull in the fighting the group made their way down towards a nearby bridge, using it for cover as they continued to hear the sounds of fighting in the streets.

“You all have to make it back to the city and stop Kataze and Firr from releasing the update,” Citrine said to the three. “If you use the original file that Firr had sent with the programming on it then you can create a trace program to help you find where the files are on the KatazCorp servers. No matter what you have to destroy those files, if midnight strikes and one of those two sits on the throne then they are the ones that will rule everything.”

“Don’t worry Citrine,” Alkali said. “We’ll make sure that we not only stop them but make sure they can’t do this again.”

The three said their goodbyes and climbed back up onto the highway, racing across to the other side while the marauders remained busy with the organization. With only being a mile from the city they were already seeing some signs of civilization, eventually getting down into a road where they had cars that the group could borrow. Just as they were about to find one however they were interrupted by the sound of Poker’s voice, looking back to see the wolf running after them while holding a box. He crossed the street to where they were and after taking a second to catch his breath he handed it over to Serathin.

“Citrine wanted me to give these to you,” Poker explained. “He said if you can get rid of Draggor’s and Xander of Firr’s influence before they reach KatazCorp and breach their mainframes then you only have to deal with Kataze. Since you’re the technomancer you will probably find the most use out of these.”

“Thank you,” Serathin said as he clutched the box, watching as the wolf nodded and began to head back towards where Citrine and the others were fighting. “You be careful now! Don’t go climbing any cooling towers.”

The wolf turned back and gave them a smile. “Don’t you worry,” the wolf said as he gave them a wink. “I’m always caref-“

His words were cut short as a truck heading in the opposite direction suddenly slammed into him, causing all three of them to gasp and look with wide eyes as the vehicle continued to drive by. When it passed over where the wolf had been standing they saw his shoes were still there, the only things that remained of the lupine. “Don’t say it,” Zen said, Serathin shutting his mouth and looking at him in question. “I saw that look, you were going to say something like he might be alright and as he flew threw the air he landed on a pile of mattresses.”

 “I mean, you’re guess is as good as mine,” Serathin replied with a shrug. “C’mon, let’s go save the world.”

“Hold on,” Alkali said suddenly, causing the two to stop and look back at him. “Citrine mentioned that we needed the original file that Firr sent us in order to find the files and delete them. Now my question to you two is, who has the datadrive?”

Both Serathin and Zen looked at one another as they pointed back and forth. “Well Alkali had it first, then gave it to Draggor,” the sabrewolf said as he traced the path of possession. “Then Draggor gave it to me when we went to the sim den, where I gave it to Zen when he went down to the mainframe room.”

“That’s right,” Zen said. “Then I had plugged it in, then the lockdown happened and as I got my guns Draggor… grabbed the drive…”

“Damnit…” Alkali said as he rubbed his hand across his face. “Alright, so Draggor has the datadrive that we need and he’s currently enthralled or enslaved to Firr or whatever. So somehow we need to find Draggor, give him the one-two punch, get the drive back, make the reverse program, and get into KatazCorp’s servers before midnight.”

Both Zen and Alkali started to nod before the ferret stopped suddenly and looked up in realization, smacking the fox in the shoulder. “No we don’t!” he said with a grin. “I know exactly where we can get a copy of the file, because I am bad with computers. Let’s go, I need to make a few phone calls along the way.”

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Xander found himself once more in darkness, this time with only a single light hanging over his head as he tried to move only to realize that he was bound to the chair he was sitting on. This time though instead of Draggor being the one preparing him for the transfer of the technomancer’s soul it was the skunk himself, except instead of being a flickering, shifting avatar he looked more like a real, flesh and blood person. “I really wish it didn’t have to be this way,” Firr said with a grin as he walked around the restrained dragon. “If you had just gone along with my plans then you would be freely walking around like your friend, thinking that what you’re doing is actually your own thoughts.”

“You!” Xander shouted as attempted to get out of his bindings, only to feel his strength leave him. “I knew it, you’re messing with my mind!” His head went down as he suddenly remembered being in a similar char, the demon attaching transfer wires to his implant, the download to his synthetic synapses… “You… downloaded yourself into me?”

“I told you this wasn’t my ideal outcome,” Firr said as he sat down on his own striped tail. “But it turns out that when your brain is partially machine, just like yours is after that nasty accident of yours, you become much more resistant to the commands that I gave you through my programming. It all worked out for the best of course, but I’m growing tired of having to fight you the entire way so I’m just going to take over completely.”

Xander continued to struggle until he saw a view screen open up in front of him, showing him and Draggor looking out of a high-rise window. From the position of the sun it looked like it was noon and they were definitely in the financial sector of the city. When his vision shifted he saw what he knew would be there but hoped wasn’t, the KatazCorp building standing there glimmering like a jewel in the sun. After hearing his own voice talk to Draggor a bit more the view screens closed, leaving the dragon to shift in his seat once more.

“I would save your strength,” Firr said as he stood back up. “Once this world is mine you’re probably going to want to do something stupid like run away or try to hide, so at least I would want to give you a fighting chance. Not that it’s really going to matter.”

As Xander realized that his bindings were complete, and decided to switch tactics. “Why?” Xander asked, the skunk seemingly in a particularly sharing mood. “What’s going to happen if you take control of Kataze’s mind control programming? Take over the world?”

“Nothing as small minded as that,” Firr replied with a scoff. “That’s Kataze’s plan after all; jam everyone’s head full of electronic parts just like he did, only they’re ones that make them completely subservient to him and disguise it as an upgrade. For me however it’s not about enslaving metahumanity… it’s converting it to my own image, with a few tweaks of course.”

Once more the view screens opened, but this time it definitely wasn’t an image of what was going on inside. Xander realized he was seeing right inside the skunk’s mind, and what he saw were… more of him. But unlike his own form these were both similar and similar to one another, watching people getting converted while they were on an assembly line. “So your idea is to turn people… into skunk drones?” Xander asked, causing Firr to chuckle.

“Why not?” Firr replied as his grin grew even wider. “Kataze and that stupid organization thought that I would be better off with no body, so in revenge I’m going to take EVERYBODY!”

Firr laughed maniacally as Xander was once again found himself struggling to try and get the crazed creature, only to fail once more. “I’m sure you’ll see the genius of my plan once I put it into action,” the skunk stated as he started to walk away. “Who knows, if you play nice with me perhaps I’ll even give you an upgrade, certainly something better then your friends who are by now probably blood stains on the highway. If they aren’t… I’m sure I think of something fitting for them.”

Back in the real world Xander looked around, the grin once more returning to his muzzle that was matched by Draggor as they looked at the skyscraper in front of them. “Is everything ready for my rebirthday party?” the dragon asked as he practically skipped around the empty office space they had taken over. “I do hope that Kataze will be there to watch me steal everything back from him.”

“It was a bit hard finding people without using any of Alkali’s contacts,” Draggor stated as he sat back. “But I found a few groups that are willing to fight for the cause. By midnight tonight KatazCorp and the entire city will be yours.”

Firr continued to walk around as he continued to get used to being in full control of the dragon’s body. Feeling Xander continuing to struggle inside of him was an almost enticing feeling, knowing that soon the whole world was going to know what that felt like. All they had to do was wait until night, then it would be time to put their plan into action…

Chapter 8:

Zen, Alkali, and Serathin all sat at a table in a café that overlooked Cerberus Alley. “I can’t believe you want us to go in there and get your original computer,” Serathin stated as he sipped his mug of chai tea. “Why can’t you just access the attachment from your manic ware account on some other one?”

“Because the service scrambles anything that someone tries to download that’s not at my specific address,” Alkali replied. “I can only read and send messages, and even that can be tricky sometimes until I’m using my commlink. Now since I keep forgetting to do what Draggor told me and leave attachments after downloading them my account should still have it, plus since it’s not plugged into the Matrix Network there’s no chance that Draggor or Xander could mess with my account.”

“You forgot to mention the KatazCorp security teams that are watching the entrance to the alley like hawks,” Zen stated as he looked down at the five men in suits that were in cars on both sides of the alley. “Unless you got some way to turn you into not you then they’re going to see us the second that we step foot inside of there. That’s if you don’t have anything also rigged to your own shop.”

Alkali just told them to be patient and that soon the way will be cleared from them, watching the traffic down on the street. Eventually he saw the person that he had been waiting for, the tiger coming up to one of the cars and knocking on their window to have them roll it down. “I’m Officer Nizzbit of City Code Enforcement,” he stated, causing the ones in the suits to look at each other before staring back at him incredulously. “I’m talking to you right now because you have racked up several very serious violations here and you are going to need to go downtown and settle these infractions right away.”

“Alright there kitten,” the crocodile in the front stated, causing the others to chuckle as he took out his corporate identification and handed it to him. “I’m sure this would clear up any matters that you might have.”

“Ah, so you’re employees of KatazCorp I see,” Nizzbit stated, the three in the car continuing to chuckle slight as they nodded. “And I’m sure you know that your corporate immunity only extends to property and places that are owned by your subsidiary, which in this case is KatazCorp?” the laughter stopped a bit as the crocodile shifted nervously, saying that he was and what did that matter. “Well, as I’m sure you’re aware, Cerberus Alley and this adjacent street are NOT properties owned by KatazCorp.”

“Yes, well…” the crocodile replied. “I’m sure you understand that we usually have some leeway on this sort of thing since we’re on official corp business. You know how it is.”

“No sir, I’m afraid I do not know how it is,” the tiger stated as he licked his finger and turned the page over. “So let’s start with time infractions based on current city zoning statues. Now these first few are a mouthful but after the first ten pages they get easier to understand.”

“Unbelievable,” Zen whispered to the other two as they took advantage of the guards staring at the tiger rattling off the fines and fees that they were going to have to pay for their parking. “I’ve never seen corporate security get rattled like that.”

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned in this lifetime,” Alkali whispered back. “Is you never mess with a bureaucrat.”

“I guess you could call him a real bureauCAT,” Serathin chimed in, the other two just looking at him as his smirk turned into a frown. “Whatever, that was funny, let’s just keep going and get this dumb computer.”

The three continued to sneak their way into Cerberus Alley until they were far enough away from the entrance that they wouldn’t be seen by the guards, though at this point they saw that they had a different problem on their hands. It was CatazCorp drones, and they were flying all over the place up and down the alleys themselves. Alkali fell back and allowed Serathin to take the forefront, the technomancer remote accessing the drones without tripping off their intrusion countermeasures. Though there were at least a dozen of the swarm drones he only needed to get into one, seeing the frequency that they were using for their surveillance monitoring and speaking with one another before using his power to broadcast through the matrix at the same hertz to flood the entire area.

The result was that while all the drones were still up and running they were essentially flying blind, which allowed them to continue to move unabated. They had to keep moving at a slow pace though, since there was still some picture being broadcasted between the pulses and if they got detected they would likely not survive the onslaught. Though Zen had somehow managed to keep his duffle bag of guns it was starting to look a little empty, and the fox stated that many of them were for the final fireworks display. It appeared that their countermeasures to the drones were successful as they made it to the Alkali’s pawn shop.

The ferret took out his key and opened the door, being careful to look for anything that might be considered unusual as he slowly leaned it. It appeared that either CatazCorp didn’t know what shop he was in or they didn’t think they would make it that far because he didn’t see anything out of place. Once he double checked they all got inside and closed the door behind him, Serathin breathing a sigh of relief as he wiped a few droplets of blood from his nose. When they asked if he was fine the hybrid waved his hand dismissively and asked Alkali where the computer was.

Alkali went over to turn on his computer when Serathin stopped him, batting the ferret’s hand away before he could push the button. “Didn’t you tell us that once you had downloaded the attachment to the datadrive you completely disconnected the computer?” the hybrid asked, Alkali nodding his head. “If that’s the case, then why is it plugged in right now?”

Both Zen and Alkali looked over to the power cord to see that it was indeed plugged not only into the wall but the computer as well, which meant that it would have turned on if he had pressed the button. Serathin asked Zen to keep the tower steady as he carefully removed the outer door from one side of the computer, being very careful not to jostle it as he peaked around to make sure there were no other wires poking out of it. When he was sure he could pull the door away he did so and revealed the innards of the computer, along with something that wasn’t there before. Alkali just looked there in a stunned silence as he saw a wad of plastic explosive that looked wired directly to the power button he was about to press as well as several other areas.

“I don’t think it would be wise to try and remove this at the moment,” Zen commented as he looked down at the bomb. “Alkali, do you need this specific computer in order to access the attachment or just access your e-mail address from this area?”

“I… need this computer,” Alkali replied once he had regained his composure. “There’s something I had to download and install in order to make it work and they said that was the only time that I would get such a thing for this e-mail address.”

“Alright, this is fine,” Serathin stated. “So that means that the program is on the hard drives, all we have to do is remove them and put them into another computer you have lying around and then use that to access the attachment.” The draconic sabrewolf continued to sit there looking at the workstation, the other two just looking at him until Zen asked what he was waiting for. “I’m just… trying to remember… which ones are the hard drives?”

“Are you serious?” Zen asked. “You’re a technomancer and you don’t know how computers work?”

“That’s because I don’t need hardware to access the Network!” Serathin shot back. “I haven’t used and actual computer in practically all my life, I just do everything through the Matrix! I didn’t think that one day I was going to have to pull a hard drive from a computer that was rigged to explode.”

As the fox and hybrid continued to go back and forth Alkali focused on everything that Draggor had taught him about computers whenever he had gone over there with a problem. Hard drives… he had one burn out before and when he brought it to the demon he went through what they were, but unfortunately the ferret was more concerned about the deal he was trying to make then what wires went ware. But he did think he remembered that he had seen them when they were pulled out, and they looked a lot like silver squares. The other two stopped and turned to watch the ferret as he went in with a screwdriver, the two staring with wide eyes as they watched him slowly get the drives unscrewed from the case before he slowly pulled them out and disconnected them.

“Ah, you see!” Alkali said in triumph as he held the hard drive in the air. “Who needs your fancy Matrix when you have the master builder here.”

Zen and Serathin just glanced over at one another for a second before the hybrid suddenly put his hand to his head. “Oh, damn!” he stated. “I could have just looked up how to do it on the Matrix on how to remove a hard drive. Actually I suppose any of us could have done that instead of Alkali just going in guns blazing.”

The response from the other two were sighs and grunts of disapproval as they just moved on to the next phase of the plan, jamming the old hard drives into a remotely compatible computer with the aid of a Matrix vid, and then hooking it up to the Network. As Alkali pulled up the files they heard a noise near the front of the shop, Zen opting to go and investigate while Serathin watched the ferret scroll though the saved messages on his hard drives to find the one he was looking for. “Excuse me for a second,” the fox said as he grabbed the computer that they had removed the drives from, as well as a pen. “I’m just going to go ahead and borrow these for a quick second, be right back.”

Serathin looked back to try and see what the fox was doing before he turned his attention back to Alkali, who had just finished finding and downloading the file to the data drive that wasn’t black boxed. “That’s fantastic,” Serathin said as he was given the drive. “I’ll work on this while you two figure out how we’re going to get to Draggor and Xander before they attempt to get into the skyscraper and, you know, essentially end the world.”

“Did you get the file?” Zen asked suddenly as he quickly walked into the back room, both Alkali and Serathin nodding. “That’s good, we should leave now. Like, right now, through the back door.”

As the three of them slipped out through the back the two KatazCorp security goons had just finished picking the lock on the door, the two smirking at one another as they slowly slid the door open while pulling out their guns. As the door swung in it moved the pen that the fox had set up, which slid across the edge of the small stool before bumping into the power button of the computer he had set on the floor. As the machine whirred to life it was the last thing that the goons heard before the door exploded outwards, taking them and part of the pawn shop with it as flaming debris rained down around them.

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Kataze continued to watch out of the windows of his office at the streets below, watching them fill with people as they hoped to finally see what he had to offer them. “Soon,” he said as his finger stroked the edge of the glass he was holding. “You’re all going to be in for a real treat when I start rolling out my upgrades…”

“Uh, excuse me sir,” Pandez said, the skunk slowly turning around to look at him as the panda straightened the suit on his tie. “Everything is ready for your party, all the preparations you wanted are complete. The only thing that I wanted to ask is… do you think that the décor is a little, well, grandiose for such an event as a product announcement?”

“Well there is nothing I hate more then half-measures,” Kataze replied as he went over and took the datapad from the panda, scrolling through it and smirking to himself as he did. “Looks like everything is in order, is everything set with security and the announcement launch?”

“The boys down in the server room are saying that they will release exactly at midnight no matter what,” Pandez exclaimed. “Minus the little teaser that you have planned for the party. I also saw that all the drones that you ordered came in and the guard has been doubled around the tower, as well as all major substations and the plant itself. Nothing but the almighty himself is going to stop you this time.”

“That is perfect to hear,” Kataze replied as he took out a small gaming console. “And I trust that you shared all of this with no one but me and those who needed to know their parts?” the panda quickly nodded his head, bringing an even bigger smile to the skunk’s face. “That’s perfect, as your reward I think that you should have a little me time, so go ahead and play the newest game that’s going to be released soon for our handheld.”

“Well I don’t normally play games like this,” Pandez explained before the screen flickered to life, his eyes suddenly drawn to the middle of the screen as he sat down in the middle of the chair. “I… suppose a little time won’t hurt though…” As Kataze went to his private elevator to go down he saw that his personal assistant wasn’t even pressing any of the buttons, instead just staring at the screen as it played the intro to the game. He had already deleted his itinerary from all the nodes in the server, which left one last one that he had just taken care of as he rode the elevator down towards the party.

Meanwhile Draggor and Xander began to make their way down from their perch and towards the next building, making sure to keep clear of any cameras, drones, and other security personnel that might be watching from the KatazCorp building. The skunk was no fool, he knew that with the countdown likely locked in to prevent tampering he was going to be at his most vulnerable. That was the reason why they weren’t even going to try for subterfuge, nor where they going for an entry anywhere on the ground floor where security was going to be the tightest. Luckily with all of this fanfare going on once more it was going to be covered by the news, and one thing that news crews had were helicopters.

As they made their way through the news building those that were dumb enough to stop them were laid out on the floor by the dragon, and after the first few that had told them to stop went down the others quickly learned their lesson and backed away from them. That intimidation lasted all the way up to the roof where the flight crew was just about to take off themselves, though the dragon and demon quickly made it clear that this was their flight. They also mentioned as they boarded the helicopter that if anyone reported it stolen they would come back and personally make sure they would regret it before slamming the doors shut.

“You know how to fly one of these things?” Xander asked, though as his eyes continued to glow with a red light it was clear that Firr was still in control as Draggor began to plug his backpack rig into the panels.

“Psh, nowadays these things basically fly themselves,” Draggor replied as he started to type into his wrist commlink, bringing up a map of the city before narrowing it down to the section they were in. “All available helipads can be clicked in so the helicopter goes straight from one to another, even restricted ones like KatazCorp just in case there’s an emergency. Normally you have to call down first, but luckily for us I happen to have an all access pass ready to go.”

The dragon just chuckled and sat back, knowing that soon they were going to be resting in the office of Kataze, the other skunk watching as his precious program was broadcasted with his administrative permissions being the one that controls everyone instead of his. About a minute later the blades of the chopper began to spin up, those that were still foolish enough to stay on the pad shielding their faces as the hijacked helicopter began to rise up in the air. With only a few minutes until they reached their destination Firr began to think about how exactly he was going to gloat after taking over the servers. His first forethought was perhaps using his newfound power to put a suggest or two in the mind of his rival that he would most enjoy watching him attempt to follow…

Down in the city streets Alkali, Serathin, and Zen were running through the streets, trying to fight the growing crowds that had started to form as they looked to see the countdown on the billboards. “Damn, they’ve already started,” Alkali said as they stopped to take a breather. “Looks like it’s going to be midnight or bust, I just wish we didn’t have only two hours to stop this from happening.”

“Good news is the building is right there,” Serathin stated as he looked over at the skyscraper that was silhouetted with spot lights that danced along the side of the building. “Do you see anything Zen?”

“Nothing on Firr yet,” Zen said as he continued to look around with the googles on. “No doubt Kataze is in the brand ballroom of his own building, ready to gloat as he takes over the world no doubt. Are we going to try and nail him after we destroy the hypnosis files or are we just going to let him go?”

“I think that we should probably focus on saving the world first,” Alkali stated. “Once we figure that out we can go ahead and try to see if we can make the CEO of a megacorp try to actually pay for his crimes. Then after that we can cure cancer and fly to Pluto.”

Though it was meant to be a joke none of the three laughed, not when they suddenly felt the weight of their situation on their shoulders. The timer that was counting down on almost every billboard in the city was like a constant reminder of the situation they were in, knowing that if it hits all zeroes and they hadn’t accomplished their task then that was it. There was no second chances and no retries, it was all or nothing as they once more picked themselves up and pushed through the crowd of partiers. There was also the fact that they had to make sure that none of the growing police force outside to help with crowd control saw them, considering they were all still wanted criminals heading towards the place that they were charged with sabotaging during a time that they were also charged with sabotaging.

As Serathin and Alkali continued their charge forward they suddenly realized they were a man short, looking back to see that Zen was standing there in the streets looking straight up at the sky. “Uh… well,” the fox said as he pointed up. “I think I may have found where our man is.”

Though the only thing the other two saw was a news helicopter Zen could see what was really going on, seeing Firr’s matrix signature shining brightly like one of the stars in the night sky as it continued to streak towards the roof of the KatazCorp building. “That’s definitely not good,” Alkali said as they watched the chopper. “If they get to the roof before we can even get into the lobby then we’re screwed. The last thing we can do is allow Firr to get into the servers, especially with Draggor leading the way with the access we got from Boozy.”

“Then it looks like we’re going to need to make sure they don’t reach that roof,” Zen said as he looked around. “We’re going to need a hell of a distraction though, do you guys think that you might be able to find some fireworks that you can borrow off of people? The bigger the better, and hurry.”

“I can do you one better,” Serathin said as his eyes flashed. “They used the Matrix to set up the timing for a fireworks display that is going to go off a few minutes before midnight, I’ll just make sure that they’re… premature. They’re set up all around the building, do you think that’s going to work?”

“It’s going to have to,” Zen replied as he took his duffle and went over to a nearby park where the crowd hadn’t filtered into yet. “How quickly can you activate those fireworks?”

“The second you want me too,” Serathin said, both his and Alkali’s eyes widening when they saw the fox pull out a mini rocket launcher from the bag. “Come on, there’s no way…”

“If you can think of a better way to bring them down I’m all ears,” Zen replied as he flipped open the targeting display. “I’ll make sure to aim for the tail, if I hit then they’ll go into a spin instead of just plummeting straight down to the ground. I’m going to count it down and you launch the fireworks when the rocket goes up to try and obfuscate it as best you can… this is still going to make quite a splash though.”

As Zen aimed for the chopper he suddenly saw the face of the ferret in front of his camera, looking up to see Alkali staring straight at him. “I don’t think I need to remind you that those are my friends up there,” he said coldly. “They may be under the influence of this creature but if you kill them with this then you had better start running.”

“In five more seconds I’m going to lose my window and you are going to lose your friends one way or the other,” Zen replied with an equal chill in his voice, the ferret giving him one more look before he moved aside and allowed the fox to set his shot. “Alright, on my mark Serathin.” The fox licked his lips as he got a targeting lock, watching as the helicopter was almost ready to disappear against the roof of the building. “Three… two… one… Mark!”

Zen fired the rocket just as Serathin sent the mental signal to the dozens of firework mortars that had been set up around the KatazCorp building, an almost blinding display of colored sparks lighting the air as the rocket streaked straight for the target. As they continued to crackle and pop in the night sky there was a punctuated boom, the tail section of the helicopter exploding into flame as it immediately began to lose altitude. There were a few screams in the crowd as the vehicle continued to spin around, though the second that it had begun to head towards the ground the safety measures took effect. Tiny thrusters immediately sent it off to the left towards a trainyard where the scanner said there was no people, falling a few hundred yards away from where the group was as Zen took the spent launcher and tossed it into a nearby pond.

Though the police weren’t as easily fooled and had seen the rocket get launched from the park by the time they were able to congregate to the spot the three had disappeared into the crowd once more. They made an immediate beeline straight towards the crash site, attempting to get there before any police or rescue teams managed to get there. Luckily the continued congestion from the crowd continued to work in their favor as they climbed the chain link fence and dropped down to the other side, Zen reading a stun gun while Serathin put on the goggles and the gloves in order to get ready to punch a digital skunk out of a dragon or demon. For Alkali his only concern was whether the two survived as they reached the flaming wreckage of the helicopter.

“I see someone!” Serathin said as he looked into the cabin that was on fire and saw the demon still sitting there, hanging from his seat belt over the pooling flames. “Man, being fire proof is definitely a boon for him right now.”

“Especially since Xander couldn’t probably reach him even with his cybernetics,” Alkali replied as they tried to maneuver their way around the area. “Only problem is we can’t reach him either and if he’s still under Firr’s thrall then we’re going to have ourselves a real problem.”

“Hold on,” Zen said as he reached into his bag and pulled out a telescoping staff, a knife, and a roll of duct tape. “If I can cut him out of his seatbelt we can try and get him through the fire by dragging him through the dirt, or at least get him closer.”

As Zen put together the makeshift poll together Serathin took a glance in the duffle bag, his eyes widening at what he saw in there. “You really are a walking arsenal, aren’t you?” he exclaimed, the fox just looking up and winking at him. “I’m glad that you’re on our side…”

Meanwhile the guests at the party inside of KatazCorp looked around in concern, most of them having heard not only the fireworks but also the explosion that took out a helicopter. Their attentions were quickly turned back towards the stage however as a purple scaled eastern dragon came up to the podium and tapped on the microphone. “Excuse me, if I may have your attention for one second,” she said, smiling at them as all their eyes eventually trained on her. “My name is Venerabela and I am the guest liaison for KatazCorp, I just wanted to let you know that we understand you might have been a bit concerned over the sudden noise and I’ve been informed that a pyrotechnics display has malfunctioned and they all went up at once. We do apologize for any stress this might have caused and please enjoy the complimentary champagne that is being passed out to you.”

The eastern dragon continued to smile as she got off the stage, which turned into a frown as she went up to Kataze. “I think I have to reiterate what a bad idea this is,” Vene said, causing the skunk to scoff. “We just had a helicopter crash outside the building and if this product launch gets delayed again there is going to be riots in the streets. Maybe we should cancel this early and get everyone out while there is still time.”

“My dear Vene,” Kataze replied as he straightened his tie. “We have a lot of important investors out there that are about to give this company a lot of money for what we’re about to offer. Trust me when I say that no one is going to even think about the unfortunate little incident when the product demo goes out. In fact I think we’re about to run a test preview in the back if you want to go have a look at it and put your fears at ease, everything is running fine.”

“Yeah, about that too,” Vene quickly said. “I haven’t seen Pandez anywhere and he usually helps me go over the final checklists when it comes to your exit itinerary. I don’t suppose you’ve seen him anywhere?”

The skunk feigned ignorance before he finally shrugged his shoulders. “I think I remember seeing him in my office actually,” Kataze said. “Once I’m finished with everything here I’ll make sure that everything is taken care of, now hurry back and take a look, wouldn’t want you to miss it because you were worrying about some unimportant details.”

The dragon continued to give him a look, but just shook her head as she went over to the back stage area. While Kataze was eager to go up to the stage and unveil his biggest showpiece that’s on the stage he had to make sure to wait, patience is a virtue after all. But as he thought back to the helicopter crash that had just happened he began to wonder if someone was about to make a play at him. While Firr was the highest on his list he couldn’t count anyone else out, and there was no way that he was going to let anyone come between him and his final victory with only an hour and a few minutes left on the clock. This time was the time and when the clock runs out there will be no power outage that will stop him from exposing everyone to the same program that he was about to show the most influential people he could muster into one room, glancing back and looking at the slackened jaw and glassy eyes of the eastern dragon staring straight at the glowing monitor…

Chapter 9:

“Why… is he… so heavy!?” Serathin said with a groan as they used the same telescopic pole in order to try and drag the demon out of the fire and towards a place where they could actually reach down and grab him. “He’s like five feet tall!”

“He’s almost there!” Alkali cried out as he left the other two and reached over to the floating demon, eventually being able to pat out enough of him that he could get purchase underneath his armpit and pulled. The others helped drag him up to the edge of the crater that was caused by the crashed helicopter and finally got him completely out. “Man, how does he make it so his clothes don’t burn off too?”

“You can ask him that when he’s awake,” Zen said before he turned to Serathin. “Oh, so you need to punch him now.”

“I do?” Serathin replied in question, hesitating for a moment before he looked down at his gloved hands. “Oh… I suppose I do.” The hybrid looked at the creature they were holding up and wheeled back, only to hesitate before he stopped. “I’m not sure I can do this, doesn’t feel right.”

“Would you rather we wake him up so that he can be conscious while you punch him?” Zen asked, Serathin quickly shaking his head. “Come on technomancer, just once in the stomach like the blind husky did and you’ll pop that skunk corruption right out of him. It’s probably going to hurt him more then it’ll hurt you.”

Serathin took a deep breath and wound his arm back several times, looking at the demon wearily as he slowly went forward and back while Alkali and Zen held the demon up a bit. Finally the hybrid braced himself and lunged forward, his fist connecting right in Draggor’s abs. Almost immediately the demon’s fist went up and punched the sabrewolf back, except his fist landed on the muzzle of the other creature. “Son of a…!” the hybrid said as he stumbled backwards before falling to the ground, clutching onto his nose.

“Huh… guess it did hurt him more,” the fox said with a shrug at Alkali before looking back at the sprawled out sabrewolf. “Hey, you might want to get that thing out of him before it crawls back in or something and you have to do it again.”

When Serathin finally got up and looked back at the demon, his finger pressed against his nostrils to try and hold back the blood, he saw what Zen was talking about. He staggered over and reached behind the demon where the skunk tail was sticking out of his lower back, then pulled on it until it popped out completely. As Draggor gasped loudly Serathin ripped the corruption apart just like the fox told him how, then went back to trying to stop the bleeding of his nose while the demon looked around.

“What… the hell happened?” he asked as he shook his head to try and get rid of the remaining cobwebs. “Last thing I remember is looking around the fusion power plant, and then next thing I know I see Serathin punching me.”

“That was on purpose?!” Serathin shouted before Alkali waved off the angry hybrid.

“We figured out what was going on,” the ferret explained. “I don’t really have time to give you the long version so the short of it is that there was a technomancer whose consciousness was transferred to a machine and he became a sprite because his partner Kataze screwed him over. Turns out however that he’s evil too and both of them want to enslave metahumanity and we have… about an hour and fifteen minutes before this enslavement program goes live and basically causes one of them to rule the world.”

The demon took a second to digest it all, slowly nodding his head. “Yeah, I think that works for the cliff notes version,” he said as he was helped to his feet. “So an hour and twenty minutes to save the world? I’ve had worse nights.”

“Well we’re certainly glad to have you back,” Zen replied, his eyes glancing over at Serathin as he continued to stand there with a frown on his face. “Most of us at least. The question is do you have the access to the mainframes so that we can destroy the files?”

“Yeah, it’s in my bag…” the demon said as he turned back towards the wreckage, his face falling into a look of horror as he ran back towards it and looked in the cab. “It’s gone!”

“Maybe it burned up?” Zen asked. “You were in those flames for quite a while.”

“No, the bag is made of the same stuff as my clothes,” Draggor explained as he put his hands against his head. “I need my bag and those access codes, otherwise it would take me weeks to hack into the server even with a hardline connection!” As he continued to look around he noticed something else that caused him to pause. “Wait… where’s Xander?”

As the party continued to rage in the streets the security guards watching the entrance to KatazCorp looked on in boredom, watching the minutes count down on the nearby electronic billboard until midnight. Once the product announcement was done they were told that they would all be able to go home, which was something they were definitely looking forward too after this night of overtime. After the initial excitement of checking in the party guests they now basically had to make sure that none of those on the streets tried to get into the building in order to celebrate with the others. As they talked about what they were going to do for the coming weekend however they stopped when they saw a slightly singed cyborg dragon start to walk up the stairs to the lobby with a backpack slung over one of his shoulders.

“Now just hold on there for a second,” one of the guards said as he stepped in front of Xander, causing him to grin slightly. “I don’t know what sort of party you thought you were coming to but the room is full and you are definitely not on the guest list.” The dragon just continued to smirk as he set down the backpack before cracking his neck. “I’m warning you, this is KatazCorp property and therefore we have authorization to use lethal force.”

“I’m sure you do,” Xander said as he looked at the other four guards that were slowly advancing on his position. “I was kind of hoping that I would be able to test this body before I had to abandon it for your servers. You all will do just fine.”

As the guard pulled out his gun to show he meant business the possessed dragon just took the barrel and bent it with his bionic arm, crushing it before ripping it out of his hands and throwing it at one of the guards behind them. As the one he aimed at was hit in the chest and brought down to one knee he tripped the one in front of him and grabbed him by the chest, then tossed him backwards as well. The collision caused the two to collapse to the ground and as the remaining two guards were distracted with the fate of their fellow coworkers they didn’t see the dragon rush them. The sound of ribs cracking filled the air as Xander punched one of them in the chest with his mechanical arm while using his partially cybernetic tail to trip the last one and smash him in the stomach so he was double over in pain.

The blue dragon scoffed at the guards he had so easily dispatched, walking back and picking up the bag he had dropped on the ground before moving forward once more. “Pathetic,” he said as he walked past them. “Don’t worry though, I’m going to make sure that we change that very soon. But for now, I have a party to crash.”

A few short minutes later the group walked up the stairs to the lobby, seeing the guards still lying there writhing in pain. “Well, he was definitely here,” Alkali stated as he looked beyond them to the elevator doors. “What do you think he’s going to do, go straight down to the server room and attempt to hack the servers?”

“There’s still forty-five minutes left until the launch,” Draggor replied as he looked at the watch on his commlink. “I think he’s going to try and rub it in the face of Kataze that he’s here and ready to sweep his victory out from under him. Plus if he attempts to override the administrative command it would give Kataze’s people time to try and lock out Firr and reinstate him.”

“That makes sense,” Serathin stated. “If anything we can peek in the party and see if he’s there, and if he’s not then we can go down to the server access room. Whatever we do I don’t think it’ll be wise if we split up, especially since Firr probably still has Xander’s body.”

“You’re just worried that you’re going to have to punch him,” Zen said with a smirk.

“I am very worried about having to punch him,” Serathin said as he swallowed hard. “Mostly because I’ve already gotten punched back once and it hasn’t been very pleasant.”

The others just nodded and made their way over to the elevators, stepping over the guards who looked like they were attempting to try and tell them to stop before they doubled over in pain. Alkali promised them that they would call an ambulance after they got done with their mission before catching up with the others that were waiting for an elevator. When the doors finally opened the four of them piled in and pushed the ballroom level, then waited to reach their appropriate floor.

After a minute the elevator dinged and the doors opened, and just as they were about to step out they froze when they saw the scene before them. The entire banquet hall had been cleared away, tables pushed against the sides with little regard to the food, drink, and decorations on them. What caused them all to really pause however was the party guests; not only were all of them in black robes but they were also wearing skunk masks and skunk tails. “Well hello there,” a voice said that brought their attention up to the stage where an actual skunk sat in flowing robes. “Welcome to my party.”

“Didn’t realize it was going to be that kind of party,” Serathin whispered to Draggor. “I feel overdressed.”

“As you can see I’ve already started the festivities for a few of my nearest and dearest donors,” Kataze said as he took a sip of the wine he was holding as he shifted his position on the throne that had taken center stage. “While everyone else will slowly become accustomed to my control I wanted to start the ball early with a few of those who would help accelerate my plans once my programming launched. Can you imagine, and entire world just like this?”

“I think that would only be fun for one person Kataze,” Alkali said as he stepped forward. “You got to realize that this is insane, right? You are using material from a meteorite in order to try and enslave, what, the city? The world?”

“Of course,” Kataze said as he sat up, putting the wine glass aside and folding his hands. “You know, when I got the drone control implant in my head and was able to see what it was like with hundreds of completely servile objects under my feet I realized something… that people were exactly the same way. All you need is the proper motivation, a little incentive, and people would be worshipping at your feet. Freedom is just an illusion, and the sooner you give up such an infantile notion that happier you will be.”

Alkali was about to reply when one of the cloaked members jumped up on the stage and pointed at the skunk on the throne. “I couldn’t agree with you more!” the figure said as he ripped off the cloak, revealing the cybernetic dragon underneath. “I bet you didn’t expect to see me again!”

Kataze looked at Alkali and the rest of the group, then at Xander as he stood there posing. “Okay…” the skunk said. “Who are you exactly?”

“What do you mean-“ Xander seemed to look down at himself and then back up in realization, giving them a sheepish grin. “Sorry, should have realized that you might have a little trouble recognizing me with the new body and all.” The dragon let out a sigh and scratched his head as the skunk continued to just shake his head. “Well after that intro the wind kind of all blew out of my sails… anyway it’s me, Firr, and I’ve come to take everything you hold dear and turn everyone in the world to drones instead of cultists and blah blah blah…”

This time the words of the dragon hit home as Kataze quickly bolted upright, getting up from his throne and starting to back away. “No way…” he said as he slowly began to head towards the stage exit. “You can’t have possibly escaped that place, especially not in that!”

“Well I did and I did,” Firr replied as he began to step forward, the grin on his face growing once more. “Now I was going to have you watch as I took everything you hold dear while you could do nothing about it, but I think I’m just going to break your body in four places and watch you squirm around like a fish.”

“Now hold on a second Firr!” Draggor shouted, turning the dragon’s attention to him. “I’m not just going to let you use my friend like that, especially not since you used me to do it!”

“Oh really now?” Firr said as he hopped down from the stage. “And how do you propose you’re going to do that?”

“By taking this hybrid,” Draggor reached back and dragged Serathin forward. “And having him punch you in the face!”

The dragon didn’t respond with words, instead he casually went over to one of the banquet tables and used his metal arm to punch a hole clean through the wood as he continued to maintain eye contact with them. “Nope!” Serathin shouted as he tried to run, Draggor grabbing him by the collar and keeping him there even as he tried to run. “Fine, you punch him then!”

“There’s no time for that,” Alkali said as he stepped forward. “Plus you’re not going to fight him alone, he can’t possibly take on all four of us.”

As they all stepped forward the possessed dragon scoffed and turned back towards his real target, only to have his face fall as he saw that in the demonstration Kataze had taken advantage of his distracted state to run. He took the table that he had punched a whole in and flipped it to the side, then ran forward as they prepared to fight him. As they attempted to land their own fists to create an opening to try and get the corruption out of Xander they found their attacks easily being parried and blocked, followed by counterattacks that sent them all to the floor. Serathin and Draggor were the first to go down, and it wasn’t long after that Alkali and Zen joined them on the floor.

“Okay, so he can definitely take on all four of us,” the ferret said with a groan as they slowly got to their feet, the dragon just looking at them with a mixture of contempt and apathy. “Hey Xander, if you’re in there at all we could sure use your help!”

Inside the mind of the blue dragon the sleeping psyche of the warrior was suddenly awoken by Alkali’s voice. Even though he couldn’t see what was going on he could feel the presence of the ferret near him… which meant that Firr was likely fighting him. He knew that the skunk could easily kill all four of them with his body, and from the feelings he was getting from the one possessing him that’s exactly what he intended on doing. There was no way that he was letting this happen, the dragon gritting his teeth as poured every ounce of determination and willpower into breaking the binds that held him captive.

Even though it initially seemed like he was getting the same result as Xander’s entire body began to quiver he saw the metal cuff begin to discolor, then with a loud snap he managed to get his arm free before falling forward and panting. He couldn’t believe how drained he was… but he had managed to get some semblance of his freedom back. As he flexed his freed arm he tried to use it to pry the other cuff off, but it had taken almost everything out of him just for the one arm. That was fine though, he thought to himself, he could make due with one arm.

As the four got to their feet once more they braced themselves for another onslaught, this time it was their turn to take the initiative as they charged forward. Zen had been the one to get there first and as he came forward with an easily blocked hook he raised up his arm to bat it away… only for Firr to find his arm not respond. His head arched back as the first caught him right in the jaw, with also caused him to stumble backwards to try and avoid Alkali following up. Though the skunk initially thought nothing of it he found himself unable to use the mechanical arm, instead having to block and attack with his other arm and his legs. Those were proving to be quite the handful for the four though as they were still getting beaten back by the dragon.

But as the fight continued Xander learned how to sense what Firr was about to do and counter his own attacks, even grabbing his own wrist when it would have hit Alkali in the face and allowing the ferret to get a jab in. He also swung his hand out to put himself off balance and Zen took advantage to get him down onto the floor. “No fair!” Firr shouted as he scrambled to get back to his feet. “You guys are cheating!”

“You’re the one who’s cheating!” Alkali said as they took a second to get a breather, the dragon still queued to fight even with only one arm up. “Why don’t you go ahead and get out of his body and fight us for real?”

“Why don’t you make me?” Firr shot back.

“Maybe we will!” Zen shouted.

“Then do it!” Firr retorted.

“Actually, we really are,” Draggor chimed in as they all dropped their guard. “You were so busy trying to razz us that you forgot to count.”

It took Firr a second to realize what the demon meant, seeing only three people in front of him as he immediately realized he had made a mistake. Just as he was about to turn around he felt a fist connect with his lower back, causing not only the dragon’s body to arch backwards but for the aethereal form of the skunk to be pushed out through his chest. Unlike the corruption that had been taken out of Alkali or Draggor this wasn’t a mere tail, this was the entire skunk as Serathin let the stunned dragon fall to the floor before grabbing Firr by the head and forcibly yanking him out. It appeared that the avatar wasn’t ready to leave his cybernetic home yet and the hybrid actually found himself slipping as the skunk attempted to retreat back into Xander’s body.

But as soon as it looked like he was starting to loose Serathin felt a pair of arms lock around his waist and pull him backwards, Zen doing the same with Alkali and Draggor right behind him. With all of them pulling backwards they quickly extracted Firr from the dragon’s body, Xander going limp as the skunk avatar flew up into the air and disappeared from their sight. With the body thief extracted they turned their attention to the dragon himself, looking to see if he was still alive as they tried to revive him. Finally the ferret took a flask from his pocket and poured the contents on Xander’s face, causing him to sputter and awaken.

“What did you put in that flask?” the dragon said as he spat the contents that leaked into his mouth on the floor. “Nitro?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Alkali said as he patted Xander on the back. “Welcome back to the land of the living, you alright?”

“Don’t worry about me,” Xander replied as he slowly stood up. “Where’s Firr and Kataze?”

“Kataze exited stage left while we were fighting you,’ Zen explained. “Firr… I don’t know where Firr went.”

“I do,” Serathin said as he looked up at the ceiling with his goggles. “He’s in the Network.”

“The Network?” Alkali repeated. “Does that mean he has access to the mainframe?”

The hybrid quickly shook his head and began to pull off the gloves. “No, without the access codes and Draggor’s rig he’s going to have to brute force his way in,” he explained as he pulled off the goggles as well and handed them to Zen. “With just over thirty minutes though he might be able to do it, especially since he is technically the first FIRR unit it means he’s rocking some heavy progenitor programming. Now I know we said no splitting up, but if I’m going to be chasing him in the Matrix you guys aren’t going to be able to come for the ride anyway.”

“So you really can interface directly with the Matrix?” Draggor asked as Serathin tossed the gloves to Alkali.

“The Matrix yes,” the technomancer explained. “Most FIRR pods too. But I can’t just go into a network like this without a point of entry and no doubt most of them are locked out by Kataze… however seeing our possessive skunk friend do his little trick makes me wonder if perhaps I can do the same with those gloves.”

Alkali looked down at the special gloves he had just been handed. “Wait a second,” the ferret said as he put the pieces together. “Are you asking me to spirit punch you out of your own body so you can follow Firr into KatazCorp’s network?”

“Firr was a technomancer before they did the whole mind transference thing to him and trapped him at that fusion power station,” Serathin explained, taking a few breathes. “If those gloves were designed to brute force his code out of a vessel and was designed with a technomancer in mind it might do the same for me too, and it would be much faster then attempting to try and find an open access node.” When the sabrewolf saw the incredulous look on the ferret’s face he sighed and scratched his head. “I don’t like this idea any more then you, trust me, I’ve already been punched enough for one lifetime and there’s a lot of conjecture on this theory.”

“Are we sure this is really going to be necessary?” Alkali asked even as he put the gloves on.

“At this point Serathin is right,” Draggor exclaimed. “If he can get into the network this way and chase Firr around it might give us enough time to find the files first.”

“Plus you can consider it payback for when he shot you,” Zen chimed in.

The draconic sabrewolf’s eyes widened as the ferret’s mouth opened slightly in surprise before turning and pointing a finger at him. “I knew you were the one that shot me!” Alkali said angrily. “This just became a much easier decision…”

Even though Alkali was upset at the sudden revelation there was still a bit of hesitation in his actions, the sabrewolf squeezing his eyes shut as he waited for the punch that might push him out of his own body. It took the prodding of several of the others that the clock was ticking before he finally took his fist and gingerly gave the hybrid a shot in the stomach. To the ferret and the others it appeared that Serathin crumbled to the ground unconscious after that, but for Zen and the goggles he saw the ghostly green outline of the hybrid get launched out after the punch connected with the gloves. From what the fox could see it appeared that the technomancer was alright, looking down at his sprawled-out body in slight shock before he turned to him and gave him a thumbs up before flying off.

“Looks like it worked…” Draggor stated as he held up the backpack that had been in the possessed Xander’s possession and slung it around his shoulders. “While he’s off in the virtual world trying to chase down Firr I’m going to use our access codes to try and get to the files first, and If I do that I can also possibly help Serathin beat Firr in the Matrix too while I’m at it. Speaking of such we’re going to need someone to haul around his body since I doubt he would want us to just leave his body here in this very creepy party room.”

“Well I’m going to go after Kataze,” Xander said as he clenched his fists. “Since I’m a real-world fighter I can beat up any drones that he sends my way, but that means that someone else is going to have to haul our friend around.”

“I’ll go with,” Zen said. “Help keep the drones from swarming you, especially since he can control entire swarms of them. Now I suppose I could take Serathin as well, but that might hinder my ability to fight too…”

The three of them looked at Alkali, who just threw up his arms in exasperation. “Fine, I’ll carry him… maybe see about shutting the product announcement down before it gets broadcast to everyone,” Alkali said as he looked at the rest of them. “You know, in case you guys fail. Plus maybe I can find a way to reverse whatever it is that Kataze did to these people.”

“Looks like we all have our plan,” Draggor said, the others nodding. “Remember, whatever you do to not look at any screens, anything here could be playing that entrancement message and if we start losing people again then we’re going to have some real issues.”

“Yeah!” Zen said enthusiastically. “Let’s go out and kick some skunk butt!”

Chapter 10:

As the group split off Alkali found himself looking in the directory of the building to try and find something that would even resemble a broadcasting area, and though he didn’t see anything marked as such he did find a public relations room that might have what he needed. The ferret raced his way towards the area, at least as best he could with a knocked-out sabrewolf on his back, and as he did an idea came to mind. He took out his commlink and as he continued to rush he brought up one of the numbers in the directory of the building that he had just looked through, attempting to connect to someone as he made his way through the labyrinth hallways. But as the call continued to ring it began to dawn on him that the guests in the hallway were not the only ones that he had enthralled ahead of tonight’s festivities.

That theory was quickly confirmed as he finally found the public relations room and saw that the four people there were just standing and staring at empty space with a blank look on their faces. Had the skunk’s lust for power really driven him to try and enslave everyone in his building? The more he attempted to find someone that was still in their right mind the more he began to think that this was on purpose as no one would be able to tell or show him anything if they were all completely lost to the programming that Kataze had created. Alkali could only imagine what would happen if the entire world became like this as he continued to find completely blanked out people that wouldn’t even respond to him waving his hand in front of them.

Finally Alkali gave up and decided to double back, going through the ballroom and towards the elevator in order to aid Draggor in trying to hack into the server in order to destroy the files that had taken everyone. As he passed by an eastern dragon that was practically drooling and the robed figurers that remained still even though all the action was finished he stopped and took off the mask just to see if he could get their attention, only to once more find blank, passive faces underneath. “I would respect that you don’t touch my stuff,” a voice over the loudspeaker said. “I need them in order to start building my empire.”

“You know that this is completely ridiculous,” Alkali commented as he poked another one of the masked creatures. “Why don’t you tell me how to get these people back to their right mind and maybe we can see about you not going to jail for the rest of your life? I hear there’s a pretty harsh punishment for mass enslavement.”

“I like to think of it more as a mass enlightenment,” Kataze replied over the speakers. “They were all able to see the glory of my creation with a simple sneak preview of what’s to come. Perhaps if you witnessed the same you would also see things my way.”

Alkali quickly looked down and covered his eyes as best he could, attempting to turn away from the screens that flickered to life. He already knew that Firr’s influence was hard to shake off and that was when he was weak, this is something completely different and at the skunk’s full strength. Even without seeing anything he could still feel the weight of the programming starting to bog down his mind, causing the ferret to run forwards to the elevator he had originally been going to. When he opened his eyes briefly to press the right button he was greeted with a mere reflection of the screen that he was supposed to be watching and nearly turned back around right then and there.

After what seemed like an eternity the doors finally opened and Alkali pushed his way in, leaving the screens behind him as the doors closed and he began to go down towards the server room where Draggor had went originally. As he did he attempted to try to figure out if he had been compromised in any way, but other then being a blank slate like those he had already met would he even know? Firr had managed to subvert the very course of their lives, not even realizing that they had been programmed to cater to his grand plan.

Still, as the ferret continued to attempt to examine himself he didn’t feel any different at all, still having his faculties about him as the elevator opened up to the server room. Almost immediately he was greeted with a blast of cold air as he walked in, the slightly frosted over doors closing behind him as he turned to try and find the servers that Draggor was working on. Though he didn’t want to rile up any security that might have been down there he hadn’t seen any so far, save for the five guards that had gotten beat up by Xander. Still, he decided to try and find him first instead of just shouting out his name.

When he turned one of the corners he saw that the demon was just standing there between the two of the server bays. “There you are,” Alkali said as he went over to him. “Did you get started with trying to decipher which server is… whoa.”

Alkali’s jaw dropped slightly when he saw what the demon was staring at, the rows of servers dominated by glowing green slates that were jammed into it. “I think we may have found where the rest of that meteorite material went,” Draggor stated simply. “Kataze is using it as the means to control others, using it like a computer circuit in order to strengthen the enthrallment effect.”

“So… do you think you can hack it?” Alkali asked.

“I… honestly don’t know where to begin,” Draggor admitted. “I can only hope that the others are having a bit more luck then we are right now.”

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The second that Alkali had made contact with his body Serathin had felt a huge surge of energy pass through his body, and a second later he felt himself flying backwards through the room. It was very brief however and when he stopped he found himself floating a few inches off of the ground while watching his body flop to the ground. At first a jolt of panic passed through him as he thought that the act had potentially killed him, but as he focused on his own form he found that he could still sense that his body was alive. That was reassuring… and when he turned to see Zen staring at him hovering there he realized the goggles allowed him to see his incorporeal form and gave him a thumbs up before shifting towards the glowing web that sprawled all around him.

This was the first time Serathin was actually able to see a network while still outside of it, admiring the beauty briefly before finding the nearest node to infiltrate. With the announcement going out it was likely that most of the security was at the outer nodes to keep people like him out, especially since Kataze was more than aware of the existence of Technomancers, but as he wiggled into the data stream he found that the inner realm much less guarded. There was also very little traffic going on and it made it easy to find out where any activity was, most of the nodes either dead or locked out so that he wouldn’t have to check. With the skunk likely looking for a way to get into the central servers he wouldn’t be bothering to hide, he thought to himself as he began to slide through the Matrix while on his data search.

The problem was that the actual Network that Firr had slipped into was huge, which meant that without some sort of trail it would be like finding a needle in a barn full of haystacks. What the technomancer needed was someone that knew this place like the back of his hand, another technomancer or even a decent IT person that would be able to show him the way. But once more he was finding trouble in that there was no one that had a connection with the network at the moment who was active. He could hazard a guess that Kataze had intentionally done it in order to make sure no one could help them out in the eleventh hour, which was quickly running out for them as well.

As he continued to scan the internet Serathin finally got a ping in another node, and though it wasn’t one that he would guess belonged to Firr himself it might be someone with the information he desperately needed. He dove down into the node, defeating the security protocols before sliding his way inside. Whatever was in there warranted some pretty heavy security, he thought to himself as he found himself in a dark room with no other features. Just as he was about to turn around however he felt the hot breath of a huge creature on his entire back that caused him to tense up, his teeth clenching at the turned around to find the red Wyrm program from before staring straight at him.

Just as he was about to pull the plug and return to his body the huge snout suddenly withdrew, leaving Serathin standing there in confusion as those huge yellow eyes stared at him. “So… you’re the technomancer that I was sent to kill recently,” the huge creature said, its rumbling vibrato cascading right through him. “I was wondering if I was going to ever see you again, it appears that it would be so.”

“I’ve never heard of a Wyrm program that could actually talk before,” Serathin stated, gulping a little as the dragon narrowed his eyes at him. “I mean, normally such programs like yourself are seek and destroy only, not really a lot of room for chatting dialogue. Which means either you’re some sort of different program disguised as a dragon, or…”

“I might just happen to be one?” the Wyrm replied, chuckling at the shocked look on Serathin’s face. “Oh don’t look so surprised, in a world where people can access the Matrix with their minds and people can take the wills of those around them did you really think that dragons would be such a strange thing to happen upon?”

“I just thought that real Wyrms were, you know…” Serathin trailed off, though it appeared that this one would not let him off the hook this time. “…fake.”

“Perhaps you can take a trip down my gullet and see if that I really am fake,” the Wyrm replied. “Technomancers are quite tasty, it’s like getting a little of both worlds in each bite.” When Serathin couldn’t help but balk at the comment the dragon just laughed. “I’m jest, I am not like those programs that you say are modeled after me.”

Serathin still couldn’t believe his eyes at what he was seeing, his mind blown by the real-life appearance of the creature. “So you’re able to actually manipulate the matrix,” the sabrewolf said. “Does that mean that technomancy is derived from dragons?”

“Perhaps,” the dragon replied. “I just happen to have a knack for it.”

The draconic sabrewolf just nodded and was about to ask another question when he realized what he was doing and shook his head. “Please, you have to help me find where this skunk named Firr is. He’s like me but he doesn’t have a physical form to anchor himself too and we don’t find him in the next twenty-five minutes then it’s possible he could take the wills of everyone on this planet.”

“Mmmm… I don’t know…” the dragon replied with a shrug of its huge shoulders. “I have a good deal here with KatazCorp, at the moment they allow me to do whatever I want and in exchange for their protection I do a little dirty work for them sometimes. I’m sure you can understand the value of having your powers protected, if someone out there were to find out that there was a real dragon on the Matrix the uproar would be quite cacophonous.”

Serathin tried to figure out what he could offer the dragon, especially since he couldn’t give him the same deal that KatazCorp had. That was when he realized that there he had the greatest bargaining chip of all as a grin spread on his face. “If Firr, the one I’m tracking, beats out Kataze then not only will he be takin over the world but KatazCrop is completely finished,” Serathin explained. “Now I know that we’re also going after Kataze as well, but if the CEO of a company is taken out that doesn’t meant that the entire corporation goes under, just that they might need to find someone to run the place… maybe someone with an intimate and extensive knowledge of the system…”

The dragon’s muzzle grew into a smirk as he looked down at the much smaller Technomancer. “I always did see myself in a management position,” he stated with a low chuckle. “So who is it that you wanted me to find on the network again?”

“There’s a skunk avatar named Firr that’s running around trying to get access to the KatazCorp servers,” Serathin explained. “He’s probably attempting to get into highly restricted ones, maybe even where Kataze is the only authorized administrator. Oh, and there’s probably a one-way valve to the data flow with a timer on it that’s set for about… twenty minutes or so at this point?”

The Wyrm nodded and lowered his body so that the draconic sabrewolf could get on, the technomancer more then willing to do so. Though he was only slightly aware of what was happening when this same creature was trying to kill him and the others in the Matrix he could sense the power that came from him, and it was that same sensation he got when he climbed up on the back of the much bigger creature. It was surreal to him that he was a creature that lived in the real world that had shed his form to be in a network and had met another that essentially did the same… but the time for waxing philosophical was after he had caught the skunk. The Wyrm told him to hold on tight and Serathin did so as it lifted up into the air and flew out of his node and back into the general network.

Unfortunately as the minutes ticked by Serathin found himself still unable to locate the elusive skunk. This creature was the literal progenitor of the FIRR network and moving through it was probably instinct for him. Even with the power of the Wyrm, whom introduced himself simply as Axikor, they still had a lot of ground to cover and the chaotic nature of how the Matrix sprawled out before them made it hard to keep track of where they were going. They quickly found that a lot of Kataze’s nodes were represented with different concepts, and after passing by one that was modeled after a bank that turned out to be representative of their accounting department both of them realized they were going to need a new plan of attack.

That was when Serathin realized that he was looking for the wrong person. While Firr no doubt was looking for the files he knew that there was another that would be as well, and when he told the Wyrm to look for something else he smirked and said that would be much easier. Within a minute the two found themselves in a library, the quintessential setting for file storage, and with everything being compressed to utilize file space the digital representation of the dragon found it hard for him to maneuver. Serathin wished the Wyrm luck and watched him fly off before he went to the source of the signal that had been tracked for him, breathing a sigh of relief when he saw the avatar of a demon looking through files.

“Draggor!” Serathin shouted, causing the avatar of the demon to look up at him.

“Serathin?” Draggor asked, the real demon looking at his screen with the ferret looking over his shoulder. Alkali had put the sabrewolf’s actual body propped up against one of the servers and as Serathin looked out through the video camera he shuddered slightly at seeing himself slumped over like that. “What are you doing here, where’s Firr?”

“He’s somewhere around here,” Serathin explained as he looked around. “I think he knows what you’re trying to do and is actually waiting for us to punch our own hole through the security to give him access now that he lost you and Xander as pawns. At least that’s what I would do if I were me, let you do all the heavy lifting and take you out when you get past the security barriers.”

“Well he’s going to have to wait a while,” Draggor replied. “Kataze used the meteorite to augment his servers, now I’m trying my best to adapt to it but it’s like I’m using a cell phone to hack a security tower. Do you think since you’re here that you might be able to help, or is that going to give him too much of a chance to intercept?”

Serathin sighed and looked around the immense library, knowing that with Firr’s skills he could be blended in anywhere. “I… I just don’t know,” the hybrid admitted as he scratched his head. “This is technically his terf, which means he has the home field advantage here. If there was some way that we could shift to a different network that we could control then perhaps we might flush him out, but at the moment the only reason why you’re not disconnected and I’m probably not dead is because he needs us to get to the server.”

Back in the real world Draggor tapped a clawed finger against his chin, then told Serathin to hang tight for a second before he turned to Alkali. “I think I may have an idea on how to trap Firr,” the demon said with a hint of worry in his voice. “However we’re going to need a dedicated server and someone who really doesn’t mind having an open port to do some really illegal stuff on it. Don’t suppose you happen to know anyone that might fit that bill?”

“I do…” Alkali said as he pulled out his commlink and brought up a number, hesitating for a moment. “This is going to be one heck of a favor, but at this point if I don’t cash it in now then I don’t think I’m going to have the chance again…”

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Meanwhile Zen and Xander looked around to try and find where Kataze might have ran off to after their encounter in the ballroom. The skyscraper was the huge however, which meant that with only a half an hour on the clock they needed to make sure that their search was extremely succinct. They decided to go straight to the source first, heading up to Kataze’s office after looking it up in the directory. As they suspected it was on one of the top floors and they caught an elevator in order to try and get up there as soon as possible. The sound of cheesy music filled the car as they quickly were pulled upwards to where they hoped the skunk was hiding out.

With fifteen floors to go however the car suddenly stopped with a jarring motion that caused them both to have to catch themselves. As they quickly regained their composure they found that the music had stopped and that the display no longer showed the floor they were on. “Did you really think I was going to just let you ride an elevator up to my office?” Kataze’s voice said over the speaker system.

“Well, no, probably not,” Xander said as Zen reached into his duffle bag and pulled out a submachine gun for each hand, hearing the buzzing and clattering noise of what was likely drones coming their way. “But it was either this or running up the stairs and I’ve already done my cardio for today. Why don’t you let us come up there and we can have ourselves a chat?”

“I don’t think so,” Kataze shot back. “But I have dispatched some friends in order to help you with your elevator problem, they should be getting you back to the lobby really soon.”

The speakers suddenly went dead as both dragon and fox could just hear the drones continuing to approach them. “Somehow I don’t think they’re going to send us down gently,” Zen said as he pointed his weapons at the hatch that was the most likely entry point. “Any ideas?”

“I have a few,” Xander replied as he used the enhanced vision feature of his eyes to get a sense of the layout of the elevator shaft and the movement of the drones that were scuttling around it. “None of them are very good and they’re all increasingly dangerous, but it will probably get us out of here alive. How good are you with those things in motion?”

Zen looked at the submachine guns in his hands and put them back into the duffel bag. “Those are mostly for spray and pray,” he stated as he pulled out two chrome-plated Desert Eagles. “If we’re talking about keeping accuracy while on the go then I’m going to want these. I take it that we’re going to be making this our stop?”

Xander shook his head and told him to get close and wrap his arms around him, the fox taking his duffle bag and hanging it over his shoulder before doing so. Just as they got close together they felt the car shift as something above them snapped, most likely one of the cables that was holding the elevator suspended in the shaft. Though both males were visibly nervous as a second cable went, which this time tilted the entire car to the side, Xander remained fixated on the ceiling while keeping Zen braced against him. When the fox asked what specifically they were waiting for the dragon just told him to keep quiet and hold, his feet shifting on the cold metal floor as the third of four metal cables were sawed through.

The cyborg creature watched with his cybernetic eyes as the drone that had been using a torch to cut the cables to the car went to the last one and it began to melt. As Xander saw the stands quickly unraveling while the heat from the flame cut through them he bent his augmented legs down, charging them as much as they can before releasing all that power into a powerful jump. His metal arm punched through the cable car just as the last one snapped, the box dropping out from underneath them just as they hovered in the new air. Zen fired on the two drones closest to them and caused them to explode in sparks and fire as Xander reached forward and grabbed the disconnected cable as they were pulled into the air by the now-freed counterweight.

Had Xander’s arm not been a machine the force of the pull upwards would have possibly ripped it from his shoulder socket as they were catapulted into the air, Zen still taking down a few more drones with several well-placed shots while he let out a battle cry of pure excitement. Both the elevator car and the counterweight plummeted through the shaft and the two lost sight of them as well as the drones that had surrounded it as they rocketed upwards. When they got close to the ceiling of the shaft Xander shouted at Zen to hang on tight before he let go of the cord and flipped over towards one of the support beams. There was a loud clang as his metallic feet gripped into the metal, both him and Zen teetering on the girder with the elevator door right in front of them.

 “Now that’s what I call an express elevator!” Zen said with a laugh as they quickly crawled over to it, Xander pulling the doors open to allow the two inside before the drones got up to their position. “I’m sure the skunk didn’t see that coming.”

“Let’s make sure that’s not the last surprise he has coming to him,” Xander replied as he looked at the time on his commlink. “Twenty minutes to go… if this doesn’t lead anywhere then we’re going to be in trouble. Mind taking the rear to make sure our new friends don’t give us a surprise of our own?”

Zen gave him a nod and walked backwards with his guns trained at the door as they walked down the hallway towards Kataze’s office. It was the only door on the entire floor that wasn’t some sort of storage or janitorial, and when they got there they found it open. With the drones likely hot on their trail they risked a potential ambush by going straight inside and locking the door behind them. Though it looked like it was only wood a closer examination revealed that it was a steel security door, which they reasoned would be enough to hold back the drones as they turned back to investigate the room they were in.

The two of them both raised an eyebrow when they saw that the majority of the rather wide space was dedicated to artwork of the skunk himself, including a statue of him that sat in the middle of the room. There was also a large, well-crafted desk that took up a section of the back wall, complete with computer that Xander went too. Though he wasn’t as much of a technical person as Draggor was he hoped that perhaps he could luck his way into finding something out, only to find when he got back there that the entire tower had been ripped out from its holder. The dragon let out a growl of frustration and slammed his fist against the desk, causing the wood to splinter and the panda man that had been on the floor to suddenly bolt upright.

“Ahhh!” Pandez shouted, causing Xander to be taken aback slightly as the other man stood up blearily and swayed slightly when he finally was able to get to his feet. “Wait a second… you’re not Kataze…”

“Who’s your new friend?” Zen asked while holding a few drawers full of files that he had ripped out of the nearby filing cabinets and set on the damaged desk.

“Someone that might tell us what we want to know,” Xander said as he walked around the desk to try and help the staggering panda, hearing something crunch under his feet as he did. When he looked down he saw that he had stepped on what looked like a game pad that was no doubt the reason for the strange actions of the panda that they had sit back down. “I think he might just be like all the others though…”

“Certainly looks that way,” Zen replied before taking Pandez’s swaying head and pushing it over so that they were looking eye to eye. “Hello there, can you help us find your boss?”

“You…” Pandez replied, falling back slightly before putting a finger against the fox’s chest. “You are an intruder…” As the other two looked at one another the panda got a big, drunken grin on his face and laughed. “I love you intruder.”

“Yeah, he’s definitely gone,” Xander said as he put the enthralled panda back down on his desk. “I don’t get it though; he’s turned all his people, taken out his computer, and basically covered his tracks… why? If you’re planning on ruling the world then why do this to everyone when they’re going to be controlling everyone anyway?”

“Well we only have fifteen minutes to figure it out,” Zen said as he sat in one of the other chairs. “If we don’t then we let a madman who had attempted to enslave the world once get away, possibly to do it again.”

Xander just nodded and scratched a metal claw against the already ruined desk as he attempted to put the pieces together. KatazCorp is ready to rule the world, but he’s paranoid enough to make sure that no one here could possibly talk. Then there’s also Firr, who had been the source of this paranoia in the first place. As Zen continued to look through the files Xander got up from the chair that he had been in and went over to the window that looked down into the streets. In less then fifteen minutes everyone glued to a screen would fall under the thrall of the skunk… unless…

“Zen, you remember when they sieged your Sim Den?” Xander asked, the fox frowning slightly before remarking that it had made an impression on him for sure. “Right, sorry, but I think I know why Kataze is covering his tracks and making sure no one found out about his plans. You said that you were modifying his pods, right?”

“To a certain extent,” Zen replied, his curiosity piqued as he ran one of his braids through his fingers. “Why would that matter?”

“Well your clients had climbed out of those pods and started to attack us,” Xander said as his mind started putting the threads together to attempt to a single coherent string. “I think that the reason KatazCorp is trying to get as many eyes on this announcement as possible is that unless you’re in one of his FIRR sim pods the hypnotic effect is lessened… or maybe doesn’t work at all. What if this is all a marketing ploy to start the ball rolling and not just him completely taking over?”

The fox leaned back in the chair, tapping his fingers together as he contemplated what the dragon was saying. “So you’re saying that unless they’re actually on the network or using a product he created they won’t be hypnotized?” Zen said in conjecture, Xander nodding his head. “But then how did that video file work then, or the screens in the fusion plant?”

“Because that’s not Kataze’s specialty!” Xander exclaimed excitedly. “Don’t you see, that’s why the skunk didn’t kill Firr outright, because he couldn’t get his side of the technology to work because he’s not a technomancer and if he couldn’t figure it out then he might need him still. They’re like… two pieces to a puzzle, the reason that neither of them can enthrall the entire world is because they would need one another to actually unlock the full power that they found.”

“I see… it’s like Draggor and Serathin,” Zen stated. “The sabrewolf wouldn’t know how to turn on a computer much less build one, but I doubt that Draggor could interact with the Matrix like he does. So then why did one betray the other?”

“That… I don’t know,” Xander said with a sigh as he looked at his commlink. “We’re going to probably have to ask Kataze that, but with it being eleven fifty with no sign of him I don’t think we’ll have that chance?”

“Eleven fifty?” the panda suddenly perked up, causing the two to look at him. “You need to get ready Kataze if you’re going to want to catch your ride before midnight.”

The dragon and the fox looked at one another, then at Pandez, the over towards the window where they could see a shape moving in the sky towards them. Though it was dark and light coming off the city obscured it they both knew what it was and where it was going, the two of them rushing back towards the office door. Before they could go over to open it however it was knocked completely off of its frame, this time by a single automation that towered over the two of them. It was definitely the biggest robotic creature that they’ve seen so far, but as they glanced over at one another they made it clear that neither of them were going to shy away from this thing.

Though the robot, which was in the shape of very large, hulking wolf, was easily twice the size of Xander he charged it anyway, jumping up on a nearby table to get more height as he went straight for the head. At the same time bullets ricocheted off of it as Zen unloaded into it, the sounds of his shots ringing in the air as he advanced at a slower pace. Though they didn’t do much it had provided enough of a distracted for Xander to wrap his arm around it and swing around until he was on its back, attempting to pull its head off while also using it as cover to allow the fox to keep firing. But once it was clear that this thing was heavily armored Zen took the guns and tossed them aside before putting his duffle down on the floor and pulling something else out of it.

As Xander continued to try and hold on while avoiding the robot clawing at him he could see Zen charging, battle axe raised in the air as he let out a rallying cry. When he brought it down on the mechanical wolf the edged blade bit down into the metal flesh deeply. A bit of a bright blue ooze leaked out of the deep cut before the robot had enough and swiped forward, knocking both Zen and his weapon to the ground and causing it to slide backwards a few feet. With the momentary distraction gone Xander soon found himself also getting hit as the force of the blow caused him to fly forwards and land on the desk, which split completely in half.

“Been a long time since I was on the receiving end…” Xander stated as he spat, then wiped the blood from his lips as he looked over at Zen. “You alright?”

The fox just groaned and slowly pulled himself up, the wolf staring at both of them before looking down at the wound on its chest. “Yeah…” Zen managed to say. “A few more fights like these and I’m going to need some of what you got. Sort of wished that I kept my rocket launcher…”

Though the two joked they knew that this new drone was very powerful and that with every second they spent fighting it the more likely reinforcements will come as well as Kataze getting away. They were going to need to take it down hard and quick, and as Xander picked himself up from the two halves of the desk that had formed he quickly scratched on out. He told Zen to continue to occupy the robot for a few seconds, the fox rolling his eyes before charging forward once more while the dragon moved the enthralled panda out of the way. Once there was nothing else in the way he took one of the pieces of the desk and lifted it up over his head before tossing it at the attacking robot.

Just as Zen was about to be nearly impaled by one of the long claws the creature had it was suddenly knocked over onto its side, hitting the floor just in time to get smashed in the chest by the other half of the desk. As the fox backed away from it the robot turned all of its attention towards the origin of this new attack, its eyes glowing red as it spotted the dragon standing there. Xander just smirked and gestured with his hand to come at him, which was something robot was more than willing to do as it set himself up to charge. It let out an electronic roar as it pounced at him with full speed as the dragon knelt down.

Once it was close enough Xander jumped, this time over the robotic creature using all the power he had to avoid it. He could feel the tingle of electricity as the metallic being tried to swipe at the dragon sailing over his head. When he completed his mid-air flip he shifted his body around and gave a hard kick to the robot’s back to send it forward even harder. The second that the metal wolf hit the windows that made up one of the walls the force of the impact caused them to shatter. The automation attempted to spin back around and grab onto the side of the floor, but with it charging head first the only thing it could do was watch as it fell downwards towards the stone stairs below.

Both Zen and Xander looked over the edge of the shattered window, watching as the robot hit the ground and exploded before they went back to the open office doors.

Chapter 11:

As Draggor continued to type furiously on his keyboard he was listening on his commlink to what Xander and Zen were telling him about their theories on what was going on. At the moment he was rather engrossed in cracking an encryption modified by a strange material that he had never interacted with before, but as he looked over at Alkali he saw the ferret was still otherwise occupied. “Listen, I know you guys are using it to host all your music,” Alkali said into his commlink as he paced back and forth. “But this is a matter of saving the entire world, which means that if we don’t then you won’t have any more fans to play too!”

“I dunno,” the voice on the other end of the line said, the coyote sitting and leaning back in his chair while in his office. “I know I owe you for that time you found out where all that pirating was coming from so we could shut it down, but this seems pretty risky.”

“Pepper, just trust me on this,” Alkali replied while rubbing his temples with his fingers. “If we’re all enslaved to either of these two skunks then you probably will be too. All we’re asking for is some time on your server to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Ehhhh…” Pepper replied, looking back at the fox that was working on a keyboard in the corner. “Hey Fox, should we allow Alkali and his friends onto our server?”

“Why does he want to do that?” Fox asked.

“Something about containing some evil skunk that’s going to try and take over the world while also making sure that another skunk also doesn’t take over the world,” Pepper explained, Alkali gesturing frantically unseen on the other end of the line as he could hear the conversation happening. “He says that we wouldn’t owe him anymore either, but that we could also go to jail. What do you think?”

Fox just stood there for a second, slowly tapping on one of the keys of the keyboard. “I mean…” he said finally. “I guess it sounds important.”

“Fair enough,” Pepper replied before turning his attention back to Alkali. “Sure man, happy to be a part of this, just don’t touch any of my personal folders. I’ll send you over the Matrix address and admin protocols.”

Alkali let out a silent cheer of victory as he turned over the call to Draggor, who used a second window he had opened on his modified commlink in order to access it. Once the demon was done he thanked the two before hanging up on them. “So what do you think?” Alkali asked as he watched the demon connect to the server. “Is it going to be enough?”

“We’ll see soon enough,” Draggor replied as he looked at the feed in the Matrix and saw Serathin still standing there. “What about you, any chance our friend is showing up now that we’re drilling into the restricted files?”

“Not a peep,” Serathin said with a sigh. “Maybe I was wrong… this is where the search for the ones that are about to go out to the masses are and yet there’s no sign of him anywhere. Even if he was going to ambush us I should have found some sort of disturbance that he was in the area.”

“Well in five minutes I should be cutting through the last of the security,” Draggor said as he looked at his commlink and saw that there was eight minutes left until midnight. “Cutting it a bit close here, but we’re going to make it. Still… more then a little disconcerting that our friend isn’t trying to stop us.”

With their focus on getting through KatazCorp’s servers the demon relayed the information that the two on the top floor had given him including their theory that Kataze and Firr were unable to complete this project initially because they had two different pieces of the same puzzle. Serathin just nodded and said that might have been write, especially since it seemed that Kataze had an ability to control drones but wasn’t a technomancer himself that he could sense. It also seemed like there were a lot of pieces that were unaccounted for, which may potentially never be solved as they continued to crack the encryption. As the seconds ticked down, Draggor watching his programs make their way into the server while Serathin kept a look out in the Matrix, it appeared they were at least going to prevent these files from being released into the public.

“Something about this…” the demon said. “It’s just… not right.”

“What do you mean?” Alkali asked. “We’re about to save the world.”

“That’s just the thing,” Draggor responded. “These files are supposed to be what causes the world to become enthralled to either Kataze or Firr, and even with Xander and Zen chasing down the former we haven’t heard a peep from the other technomancer. Is he going to just let us delete these files and ruin his chances to get revenge on Kataze?”

There was a long moment of silence as what the demon said sank in, both the ferret and the hybrid not able to come up with a good answer for that. They were only a few minutes away from getting into server, and yet the other skunk hadn’t shown his face only once. As Serathin looked at the representation of the hack, which was an automated bit drilling into a safe in the middle of the bookshelves, he knew that Firr had to know what they were doing at this moment. If he was going to intervene this was the time, because the second that Draggor was able to access the files they were ready to burn them for good.

That brought them back to the theory they had just heard… and if it was true where that fit into the entire equation. None of them had an answer though, and they just decided to continue to do what they came here to do and try to figure out the skunk’s motivations later. But as Serathin peered around the digital world he tried to get into the mindset of Firr, trying to figure out what the technomancer could possibly want if it wasn’t to stop them from getting at these files. He knew that Firr wanted what Kataze wanted, which was dominating the world, and also wanted to hurt the other skunk in the process. They all knew that the easiest way to do that was to make sure that Kataze couldn’t fulfill his own plan of broadcasting the enhanced enthrallment… and as a revelation came over Serathin he heard the sound of the secure files being accessed and turned to see a blowtorch appearing right where the drill used to be.

“Wait!” Serathin shouted, stepping forward and pushing the blowtorch out of the way before it could burn the files.

“Serathin, what are you doing?” Draggor said in shock as his command to destroy the files was overridden. “We have two minutes to destroy these files or they’re going to be released to the world!”

“Exactly!” Serathin shouted, reaching in and taking out the hypnotic commands before waving them in the air. “If we don’t destroy these then Kataze wins, doesn’t he? You never had a need to change his administrative permissions, so why don’t you go ahead and show yourself before I decide to put these back into the server and let him go through with his plan?”

For a few seconds the three of them waited, Serathin looking around in the darkness of the digital library while the other two were glued to the screen to see what the hybrid was talking about. Only a few seconds went by before they heard a slow clapping of hands, Serathin turning to see Firr appear out of the darkness. “Well well well,” the skunk stated as he stood there. “Looks like you got it all figured out, don’t you?”

“Most of it,” Serathin replied with a smirk as he continued to keep the files he had taken and hovered them over the access port. “Why don’t you go ahead and fill in my new friends here on the rest? Otherwise have fun attempting to undo all the programming Kataze was about to unleash.”

Draggor’s avatar just looked at the skunk in question, both him and Alkali watching as Firr merely shrugged his shoulders. “So as your technomancer here guessed I didn’t need Kataze’s files in order to do what he was attempting to do,” Firr admitted. “What I needed was the location of the technology that he had built to coincide with it. Honestly I didn’t even think he had figured out a way to build a pod that could integrate the enthrallment… at least not until I managed to get word that he was planning a release party.”

“So… I think I get it,” the demon said. “All this time you still wanted us to destroy the files, because if Kataze didn’t have them then he couldn’t go through with his plans… and if we did so then maybe we would even leave you alone.” The grin of the skunk only seemed to grow as his plan was unveiled. “But if that was the case then why come here yourself when you could have just went along with this victim thing and had us destroy the files?”

“That I bet I can answer,” Serathin stated. “Now that we’re all lifting the veil all the connections are being made… namely the fact that if you don’t need the files then you do need something else in order to carry out your plan. I’m guessing… the technology that Kataze made in order to spread these files?”

“He always was better at that sort of thing,” Firr stated. “I will admit that it was rather hard to find his little pet project, especially after he brainwashed all the employees that might know about such a facility and destroyed all the trails… except that he forgot a few important reservoirs of data retention that were put there specifically for the purpose of catching such things. It took me a while but with your group running interference you’ve actually provided quite the effective smokescreen, the only sad thing is I won’t be able to see Kataze’s face when he realized that I beat him.”

“Perhaps you still can,” Serathin as he looked over at Draggor. “Do it now!”

The demon executed the command that he had been preparing and in a matter of seconds he took the Matrix node they were operating in and shunted it towards the server that he had opened a portal to. Both Serathin and Firr found themselves getting sucked towards it as Draggor did a force download on their Matrix signatures after having locked onto the skunk while they talked. Though Firr attempted to fight the suction he found himself getting dragged in by the sabrewolf until both of them were pulled out of KatazCorp’s servers. Alkali, who had kept the owner of the server on the line this time, told the coyote to cut off any communications aside from Draggor’s port that remained connected.

Draggor watched as both Serathin and Firr appeared in the new virtual space, which was mostly just a default landscape setting that came with the server before anyone had formatted it. They could hear music playing as well that was likely from the sound files in use on it as the skunk and hybrid got to their feet. With the node now in a neutral server the cloaking that the skunk had employed before to remain hidden had dissipated, but as the sabrewolf got up to try and contain the creature it was clear the other technomancer still had considerable power. Before Serathin could get to him he disappeared elsewhere in the server, and though he could sense where he had gone the skunk could run him ragged while attempting to figure out a way to escape their trap.

“Draggor, I need your help,” Serathin said as he looked at the avatar of the demon. “This area is still too big for me to affect with my power effectively, we need to somehow box him in and have the means to bring him down.”

“It’s going to take more time then we have to try and build something custom to trap him,” Draggor replied, using his computer to help the technomancer continue to try and track the skunk. “Plus he’s going to see me building and counteract it.”

Serathin stopped and looked around at the default nature of the server, realizing that nearly anything could replace the primary programming in it. “Hey Draggor…” the sabrewolf stated as he began to warp the code around himself. “You got any games in that rig of yours?”

“I may have one or two…” Draggor said, hesitating a moment before a smirk formed on his muzzle. “Alright, I see what you want to do, let’s get this party started.” He quickly opened up another window and started to look for something that would fit the bill, Serathin stating a few parameters that would also be useful in capturing Firr. Once the program was ready Draggor downloaded it into the server, the landscape dissolving away…

As Firr continued to elude the other technomancer the grassy field underneath his feet suddenly turned to hard, brown rock. The skunk looked around to see that the rivers went from water to lava and the air was filled with ash. As his eyes glowed and he used his technomancer power he found that he had a new UI system as well, except since he was playing from the other side of this game the gauges became instinctive. He realized what they were doing and it caused Firr to go from looking for a way out to absorbing the rules of this new situation so that he could adapt to it.

One of the things he quickly found that he was able to do was summon weapons, and with his abilities he was able to easily cheat as he formed a gun with an unlimited amount of bullets in it. Since he was in a game, likely a local one versus one multiplayer match, he attempted to learn the rules. As he meditated on it however he heard a screech and looked up to see a demonic looking creature rise up from the lava towards him. With a few squeezes of the trigger the imp-like monster fell to the ground before disappearing, the skunk watching the digital signature get sent back into the code to be reconstituted again at a later time.

“Well that is something,” Firr said as he saw others beginning to crawl out of their spawning points as well, an evil grin spreading across his face as an idea came to mind…

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Xander and Zen ran up the remaining stairs towards the roof of KatazCorp, skipping whatever steps that they could in order to get to the roof faster. The two reached the helipad just in time to see the helicopter that was about to land there with the skunk standing nearby while holding a suitcase. “Kataze!” Xander shouted. “Where do you think you’re going?! You’re about to miss your own party!”

To their surprise Kataze actually did so, a grin on his muzzle as he turned to regard them. “I think I know how this is going to end already,” he said. “Soon everyone is going to be flocking to buy our products, and when they do they are going to fall under my thrall even more. Those in my building are just in the beginning, and had you not crashed my party as you call it I would have been able to more properly mold them into those receiving of guests, I have a warehouse full of prototypes ready to brainwash the masses.”

“You sure about that?” Zen said this time, shouting slightly as the helicopter continued to get closer. “Perhaps you should stick around for a few more minutes and see for yourself!”

Though the sneer on Kataze’s grin remained their bold declaration was enough that the skunk paused even when the helicopter pad landed in the nearby circle. He walked over to the edge of the roof and watched as the crowds began to cheer from the countdown only having a minute or so left while Zen leaned over to Xander. “The helicopter is remote controlled,” the fox whispered, pointing to his goggles. “All the drones on this roof are too, and I can see the modules where they’re all connected.”

“Where’s the control point?” Xander whispered back as he continued to keep his eyes trained on Kataze, as well as the drones that were starting to approach them as well.

“Kataze,” Zen explained. “I think he has a neural implant, something that’s allowing him to control things wirelessly with his mind.”

“Then we have to try and sever his connection through the modules,” Xander whispered. “Think you can hit the modules to keep him and this helicopter on the roof?”

“I’m sure I can think of something,” Zen said as he patted his duffle bag. “Still have a few tricks left. What about Kataze though, how are we going to keep him here?”

As the two watched they could hear the countdown from ten happening, quickly getting to zero and the KatazCorp logo appeared on the screens. As the skunk watched his face went from smug to shocked, then enraged as he watched a normal advertisement for the product that he had intended to brainwash the masses. “Somehow… I don’t think keeping his attention is going to be a problem,” Xander said as he stepped forward as more drones suddenly appeared out of nowhere. “Anyway…”

Xander hardly had time to ready himself as the first wave of drones came at him, whizzing by at high speeds with blades and stun batons aimed right at him. It was a dangerous double threat of weapons; while the spinning saws and skewers could damage his cybernetic components it would more likely try to slice his actual flesh while the stun batons would wreck more havoc with his augmentations. Even with his upgraded senses and reflexes he was having a hard time defending himself from the increasing swarm of drones that were being controlled by Kataze. It was like being in the middle of a swarm of angry bees… except these bees were the size of his head, made of metal, and armed with more then just a stinger as he punched down several before receiving a gash in his scaled arm.

From somewhere outside of the swarm he heard Zen yell duck and the dragon quickly did so, and in the next moments he heard the sound of metal tearing and components exploding from a hail of bullets being fired near him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the fox running towards a different area of the roof, but as he did so he had taken the submachine guns back out of his bag and were firing them all around. It didn’t take long for him to run out of bullets, but by that point he had thinned out the drones on Xander long enough for him to gain the upper hand. With a mental command the dragon activated another special feature on all his limbs, blades and spikes pushing out to turn them into even more deadly weapons.

With Xander taking out more of the drones it had taken a lot of heat off of Zen as he took the empty guns and tossed them to the side. His duffle bag was nearly empty at this point, most of his guns either used up in their journey to get here or in the subsequent fighting that had been happening, but he definitely wasn’t dry yet. With one hand pulling out the desert eagle pistol to try and keep the other drones off of his back he used the other to grab a smooth, shiny sphere out of it. He pressed down a button on the top of it and tossed it at the node where he saw the matrix connection running out of, watching it sail though the air towards it target.

There was a loud thud and Zen grimaced as one of the drones that had passed by grabbed the grenade right out of the air. As he pulled out a second grenade he fired at the drone that still had it, though he had to continue to pull away to shoot at those that were taking notice of him. Kataze even glanced over to see where the fox was and then over to the node that he had attempted to destroy in the first place. But by that point though he had managed to sink a round into the chassis of the drone with the grenade in it. Zen, Kataze, and even Xander after smashing two of the machines together watched as the sphere rolled out of the hand of the drone and settled to a stop underneath the helicopter.

All three of them had less then a second before the grenade exploded underneath the vehicle, the spinning blades sailing through the air as the fuel tank quickly ruptured and enveloped the whole thing in flame. Zen was close enough to the edge of the helipad to jump off as one of the props sailed right over him and jammed into one of the nearby cooling towers. Both Xander and Kataze both were not only caught in the blast, Xander tumbling to the side of the building as several drones were thrown off of the roof as well from the explosion. As the dragon looked over to his side he saw that the skunk had fared even worse then him and had gotten hit in the shoulder with something that caused him to tumble off of the skyscraper.

Xander immediately scrambled to his feet, still keeping his augmented arm in front of him as the helicopter continued to send metal and fire flying through the air. His mind was on autopilot at that point as he ran towards the edge of the building and dove right off of it. The dragon could already see the skunk still in the air with his arms flailing about. With KatazCorp being one of the tallest buildings in the city it would only give him less then a minute to catch him as he streamlined his body so that he would fall faster.

The wind whipped around both of them as Xander closed the gap between them, the dragon eventually stretching his hand out in order to grab the suit of the skunk. The second that he grabbed them he reached back with his mechanical arm and grabbed against the only thing that was next to him. Glass and metal showered down around the both of them as his chrome claws dug into the side of the skyscraper. He dragged a long furrow down several floors to eventually slow down his momentum until they stopped, and the second that he found himself hanging against the side of building he used his tail to smash the glass and allow them both to swing inside.

Kataze rolled into the office, glass crunching under him as the dragon swung in after him. “You think that saving me is going to help you?” the skunk said as he slowly got to his feet while Xander just stood there with his arms crossed. “After I make sure that you and your friends go into a hole in the ground for the rest of your natural lives I will take what you messed up and just try this again…”

“You’re welcome,” Xander said simply.

“Screw you,” Kataze growled. “My drones are going to rip you-“

The dragon just rolled his eyes and darted forward, pressing his palm against his chest and running an arc of electricity through it. Kataze’s entire body shuddered and spasmed as he was essentially tased, then crumpled to the ground. “Target is down,” Xander said as he looked down at the unconscious skunk. “How are you doing up there on the roof Zen?”

“All the drones just went down,” the fox replied, walking away as the second grenade he had thrown blew up the node and severed the matrix connection. “I blew up the control console just in case there’s something nasty that was still there. What should we do next?”

“I think we need to go down and see what the other three are doing,” Xander replied. “It’s clear they had managed to get the files out of the system before the product launch, but who knows if they still managed to get Firr under control yet.”

Chapter 12:

Serathin looked around in the blasted, desolate landscape, feeling the hot air of the hellish realm blow through his fur. “You seriously couldn’t have found a better game then this one?” he asked the demon next to him as he felt the interface of the game interacting with his own technomancer abilities. “Something with candies or birds or something?”

“You said you needed one with a health bar and respawn and this was the first one that I had up in my queue,” Draggor explained. “Do you really think that you can beat him here though? With the way that I had to set up the command execution to intervene before the respawn I’m not going to be able to stop it, which means that if he takes you out instead of the other way around.”

“Then Firr escapes and I’m trapped,” Serathin stated with a sigh. “Luckily I’m a much better shot in the Matrix then I am in real life.” He paused when he remembered that Alkali was there with Draggor, grinning sheepishly. “Sorry again.”

Back in the server room Draggor had a grin stretched across his entire muzzle as Alkali pressed a hand against his still wounded shoulder. “Don’t think you’re just going to get away with that either,” the ferret said as he pointed a finger at the screen that still showed the sabrewolf. “We’re going to be having a long chat about how you’re going to pay me back for that one.”

“Well let’s make sure that I have a chance to do that,” Serathin responded before holding out his hand and having a rifle appear there. “Alright, why don’t you go ahead and go into spectator mode while I see if I can find were Firr is. Also if you have any tips on this game don’t be afraid to whisper them into my ear, they would be most appreciated.”

Draggor nodded and his avatar disappeared, though the demon continued to have a watchful eye on the sabrewolf as enemies began to spawn near him. Though he could have just ignored them he decided to shoot a few in order to get some practice in, trying to figure out how the game worked and where he could use his abilities to try and give himself an advantage. No doubt Firr was somewhere out there doing the same thing as Draggor attempted to use the spectator mode he was now in to try and find him. With the server completely disconnected from all but Draggor’s computer it meant that it was just the two as Serathin moved forward towards the first objective.

Serathin continued to keep an eye open for any traps that might have been laid by the skunk while he moved forward, not knowing if Firr knew about this game at all either. While it was rather new it was clear that the imprisoned technomancer was able to sneak out of his digital prison once in a while to interact with the megacity, something that his captors had not intended on. Even if he had never seen this before however the skunk had the advantage of living primarily on the Matrix, at this point manipulating code was probably second nature to him. As he climbed another craig, muttering about how much he hated the heat, Draggor suddenly chimed in his ear that he got a hit on the signature of the other creature.

It was at a river delta of fire and lava, a hellish place that Serathin was even less fond of heading towards then the rest of this game, but as he crossed over a ridge and looked down he could see the skunk standing there. He must have been digging into his integration settings, the hybrid thought to himself as he dematerialized his gun and called forth a sniper rifle instead, which meant that it was possible they got the jump on him. He looked around once more to make sure that he wasn’t about to be approached by any enemies, monsters of the game or otherwise, and then looked through the scope. A few more seconds, Serathin thought as he put the cross hairs right on the back of the skunk’s head, one good headshot and this nightmare would all be over…

The sound of the sniper rifle echoed throughout the landscape of the game as time slowed down all around him. It was likely some sort of effect that was programmed into sniper rifle or headshots as Serathin was able to watch the bullet streak towards its target, then have Firr’s neck snap forward a few seconds later as it connected. The sabrewolf let out a sigh of relief as the game itself announced a critical headshot while the other avatar fell to the ground. He stood up and walked down towards the prone figure, waiting to get confirmation that Firr’s essence had been transferred to the blackbox datadrive before heading back to his own body.

“Uh… Serathin?” Draggor said, Serathin hearing the demon’s voice in his ear. “There was zero confirmation of a download here.”

The statement chilled the sabrewolf despite being surrounded by digital lava as he carefully hoped from island to island in order to get to the spot where the skunk had dropped. “What do you mean there’s zero confirmation?” Serathin asked. “He has no body to kill, which means that he would have abided by the rules of the game and respawned, except that we’re intervening. How could he not have been caught by your net?”

“I don’t know man,” Dragon replied as Serathin finally got to the spot where Firr had dropped. “The kill was confirmed and you definitely scored the points for it, but there wasn’t a player respawn action that initiated because of it.”

Serathin felt his mind race as he carefully knelt down to the creature that he had sniped, swallowing hard as he reached over with one hand while keeping a pistol drawn on it with the other. The second that he rolled it over he jumped back and trained his gun on it, only to lower it when he saw the blood red eyes and jagged teeth that clearly didn’t belong to Firr. “No way…” the draconic sabrewolf said as he watched the features of the skunk turn back into that of one of the imp monsters that were part of the game. “How did he-“

The next second Draggor had shouted something, but it was lost in the rapport of gunfire as Serathin turned his body just in time to take a round similar to the one he had put into the dissolving data of the monster at his feet right in his chest. The sabrewolf stumbled as he felt his health bar take a nosedive, his breath burning even more in his lungs as he attempted to get out of the path of fire. There was another shot that rang out and he could see the rocks explode upwards to where he had hit the ground, clutching his chest as he tried to get to a nearby rock outcropping for cover. An ambush… one that the sabrewolf had fallen for as Firr fired several more times from a place that he didn’t even see as he ran for his life.

“Damn!” Draggor said as he tried to zoom out his camera to see where the assault was coming from. “How did he create a copy of himself like that? That’s not even possible in this game!”

“I think we might have bigger problems than that,” the ferret said as he looked over to see a trail of blood trickling from the mouth of the real Serathin sitting behind him.

“Firr must have disabled the respawn controls on the game,” Draggor said as he began to type into the computer. “If he did that then our plan’s not going to work, and the longer he’s in there the more he’s going to be able to alter the game to his advantage.” He went back to the screen and at the severely injured sabrewolf, though the bleeding stop as the natural health regeneration of the game kicked in and prevented him from being completely at the verge of death. “Serathin, you have to get out of there, if he kills you there you won’t get trapped, you’ll get killed.”

“No way,” Serathin replied as he tried to peak out from the rock, only to get brushed back by a bullet hitting the side of it. “Xander and Zen managed to get Kataze, I’m not going to let Firr escape. If anything he’s the more dangerous of the two since he can possess other people with cybernetics from the Matrix…”

“Then hold on,” Draggor replied as he typed another command into the console, Serathin looking over in the game to see a health box appear next to him. “That should heal you up for now.”

“Wait a second,” Alkali said. “Did you actually mod this game so that you could cheat?”

“Bigger fish Alkali!” Draggor exclaimed as he watched the sabrewolf use the health box to heal himself back to full. “So what do we do then? Try and kill him in the game?”

“Actually… I think I may have a better idea,” Serathin stated. “It’s a similar play to what we did with Xander in the ballroom, I’m going to need everyone in the game to pull it off probably. And when I say everyone, I mean everyone, but before you do that if you could get me an escape route I’ll buy you guys some time to get in here.”

Serathin went into a few more details of his idea as Draggor put in another code, this time enabling not only an expanded armory for the draconic sabrewolf but a few other perks to add to his avatar without him needing to use his technomancer abilities. Finally he put down a temporary fog of war so that the hybrid could escape… but it appeared that Firr had caught on to their actions and he suddenly found himself kicked out of spectator mode and the game all together. “Looks like that’s all we can do from here,” Draggor said while disconnecting his rig as Alkali picked up Serathin’s body once more. “I still have the link to the game though, but we’re going to need to find some sim pods first.”

“This is the place where they were invented,” Alkali stated. “There has to be test rooms or something of that nature.”

“Yeah… unfortunately everyone here is completely brainwashed by Kataze’s program,” Draggor sighed. “I could try and look in the directory but we need sim pods that are hardlined into the servers because that’s where the portal originated, which means I would have to probably hack into them. I may have bought Serathin a few extra minutes but if Firr is in there changing things about the game and making clones of himself out of the monsters he’s going to get overwhelmed really quick.”

Alkali shifted the sabrewolf on his shoulders and glanced from the unconscious man to the demon, then over to the servers before his gaze went to his hands. “What if I did the same thing I did to Serathin?” the ferret asked as he brought up the special gloves he was wearing. “You know, punch you into the Matrix?”

“That’s… probably not going to work,” Draggor replied. “The only reason that they even probably worked on Serathin was because he was a technomancer himself, which I am not, and they’re specifically just to cleanse anyone that might be affected by Firr’s programming…” the demon stopped for a second before his face suddenly lit up in a burst of inspiration as he looked at the confused ferret with a grin. “Alkali, you’re a genius, let’s go!”

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Vene didn’t know what was going on, one second she had been watching something on the screen while backstage and in the next it was like the wind had gotten knocked out of her. As the Eastern Dragon doubled over she found herself being helped by a demon while a blue-scaled dragon and a ferret stood on either side of him. “Sorry about the rude awakening,” Draggor said, helping her get back up to her feet with the other two doing the same. “Your boss had enthralled you as well as everyone else in this building so that he could try to take over the world.”

“I… what?” Vene asked, shaking her head as she could see a fox punching and karate chopping the dazed guests in the main room. “How is this even possible? Kataze doesn’t have any ability to do something like that.”

“You can ask him about all that later,” Alkali interjected. “Right now we need to know where we can find some sim pods in order to stop his old partner Firr from doing the same thing. I know this seems strange to ask you to trust us like this but if we don’t stop what’s about to happen one of our friends might die and what happened to you could happen to a lot of other people.”

Vene continued to eye the three up wearily, as well as seeing the hybrid on Alkali’s shoulders, before sighing and putting her hand to her forehead. “I knew that there was something wrong with all this,” she said as she shook her head. “We have a prototype sim bay near the top floor of the building, it’s not hooked up to the Matrix and only has direct access to the servers of KatazCorp. But I don’t have access to that, you’re going to need to find someone far higher up to get through the biometric locks.”

“I think we have that covered,” Xander replied. “Thank you so much, you’re not going to regret this.”

The three called over Zen, who had been gleefully snapping the other entranced individuals out of their hypnotized state, and as they left the stage the dragon picked up the skunk they had stashed near the back. With the product launch finished and the original crisis averted they were no longer on the clock to save the world, but they did have someone in trouble and rushed their way towards the elevators. Draggor informed Xander and Zen while they waited that they had purged the files from the launch that would have caused the hypnotic suggestion to be broadcasted to the city, as well as where those files came from. While they were all slightly shocked that Firr was the source of the brainwashing and not Kataze it made sense, especially with how much they had been affected by the technomancer when he was still imprisoned at the old fusion power plant.

When they got to the research and development floor Xander took Kataze’s face and pressed it up against the retina scanner while Zen reached in and kept his eyes opened. A few seconds later the metal doors opened and they walked inside, only to stop when they heard voices within. It sounded like two people complaining, though as they continued to stand just inside the door they actually thought it was more like three or four. Alkali took a second to peak in and saw that there were not only cameras but also security guards that were milling about, all of them looking like a cross between a husky and a raccoon. From the sound of their conversation Kataze had put them there just in case someone, likely Firr, had tried to get into their server systems through the sim pod itself.

It was clear that while Kataze knew that Firr had the means to possess cybernetics he didn’t know just how powerful the other skunk was, but that didn’t matter at the moment as they looked at one another to try and figure out what to do. The pods were on the other side of the bay and even if they could get to them the roaming guards would see them opening the pods and likely had cameras in the area as well, which without Serathin being active they had to worry about. As they wondered about the logistics of perhaps taking them out Alkali just stood up, adjusted his jacket, and told them to wait back here and follow his lead. The others looked at one another as the ferret walked right out and went up to the first huscoon that happened to be nearby, clearing his throat to get their attention.

“Just what do you think you’re doing?!” Alkali barked, causing the eyes of the guard to widen slightly. “We should have been ready to go half an hour ago!”

There was a moment where the hybrid just looked at him, as though his brain was taking a second to reboot before the scene finally seemed to click with the canine. “What do you mean?” He asked, the noise also prompting one of the other guards to come over to help handle the situation. “No one told us anything needed to be ready.”

“Perish the thought anything should go smoothly around here!” Alkali continued to shout in his booming voice. “We’re supposed to be demonstrating the new pods here and I don’t see any sim pods prepped, no cameras, nothing! I know that most of it is supposed to be done in the Matrix, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t have a little showmanship of the hardware itself!”

While Alkali continued to let loose a flurry of complaints, which had brought over the other two guards in the bay as well with his loud voice, Zen and Xander took Serathin and Kataze’s bodies over to where the pods were while Draggor decided to step in and help with the deception. “What is going on here?” Draggor said in an exasperated voice, holding his head in mock shock as he looked around. “Where are all the green screen backdrops!”

“Do you know where the green screen backdrops are?” Alkali said as he pointed to the one that had the name Ian on his name tag.

“I… uh…” the other huscoons looked at him as he glanced about nervously.

“There are no green screens!” Alkali shouted, flailing his hands in the air as Draggor just looked down at the ground in dejection. “And I suppose you’re going to tell me now that we do not have the jugglers or the flaming tequila tower either?” The four continued to just look at one another with increasing anxiety as the ferret shook his head. “Well, what are you all still standing around here for, you need to get this done immediately while we set up!”

“Yes sir!” another huscoon, this one named Erik, said before he started gesturing to the others. “I’ll go tell Exile what’s going on, you two go to the kitchen and I’ll head down to the storage room!”

The four immediately started to run over themselves in order to get out the door, Alkali and Draggor watching them leave before the demon turned to the ferret. “How did you know that was going to work?” he asked as they started to move towards the sim pod bay. “For all we knew they where instructed to shoot anyone that came through those doors that wasn’t Kataze.”

“I figured since they weren’t brainwashed, they weren’t in the know on Kataze’s plan,” Alkali explained. “Probably deliberately so, that way he could have someone here to make sure that his prototypes stayed safe. I just don’t think he counted on a cyborg dragon tasering him and then having people break into the lab just so they could use them.”

The demon just chuckled as they went over to the sim pods as Xander and Zen came up from their hiding spot and started to open them. They took Kataze’s body and hid him in the first one that opened, then after making sure he was still alive they did the same to Serathin for the second. Once they had made sure that they were secured Draggor went over to the console that controlled the entire pod bay and hacked into it, using the backdoor he had already installed in order to quickly get to the area he had designated as the entry point into the other server they were using. He was relieved to find that the were still two players in the game that was running, though as he continued to look into the game statistics it showed that nearly three dozen had already been registered as killed. It appeared that Firr was getting better at his cloning game… but what really concerned him was the number next to Serathin’s name.

“Hey Alkali,” Draggor asked as they got the next pods ready for Zen and Xander to go in. “You made sure that Serathin was alive, right?” The ferret looked over at the one they had stuck the hybrid in before nodding. “Strange… it says here that he’s lost more then once, but if that was true then he should be dead.”

“Might be something that Firr did to the system,” Alkali said with a shrug as the pods closed around Zen and Alkali to bring them into the Matrix. “Speaking of… are we going to have to worry about getting killed when we go in there? Because I’ve already had to deal with almost getting murdered once and I would prefer if we didn’t go through that again.”

“I honestly don’t know,” Draggor said as the last two pods opened for them. “It’s been more than a few minutes since we last checked in with Serathin and saw the game, for all we know he’s already escaped and we’re all about to get ambushed. Either way we have to get in there, if Firr does escape then we’re probably never going to find him again.”

That was enough for the ferret to get stone-faced and climbed into the pod that was ready for him, Draggor still typing into his computer all the way up until he had to set it aside as the doors closed. It was yet another reminder that they were going all in on this gambit, an idea that even seemed half-formed when Serathin had told them. There was no one on the outside that would help them if they needed it, and though Draggor had some control of the game and Serathin could use his technomancer powers they were all at the mercy of the matrix and the one potentially controlling it. As Draggor had said they may be walking into an ambush, but as the pod doors closed on Alkali and left him once more in darkness he knew he just had to wait and see what was on the other side.

Chapter 13:

The second that Alkali opened his eyes once more he found himself standing in what was practically the middle of a crater, hearing the sound of explosions and gunfire in the distance as though he had just been dropped in the middle of a war zone. Draggor had come in the same time he did and the demon, whose avatar was far livelier now that he was actually fully immersed, practically grabbed the ferret and pushed both of them out of the way as another bomb hit the ground and nearly blasted them into the air. “Freaking spawn killer,” the demon said as he got up and brushed himself off while Alkali did the same. “Also it seems that Firr has introduced artillery into this game… that’s a new one for me.”

They huddled behind one of the rocks as Draggor opened a virtual console, typing in commands just like he would with his rig while frowning deeply. “The code is becoming heavily corrupted,” he said as he attempted to put in a few of his own custom commands, only to be denied. “My guess is Firr is attempting to crash the entire game, if he does that then he gets shunted back into the server proper where he’ll probably find some way to get out into the Network proper.”

“What about the others?” Alkali asked.

This time Draggor closed the console and brought up a map screen, Alkali seeing several dots pinging on it. “Looks like Xander and Zen are alright and on the move with the package that Serathin requested,” the demon explained as his clawed hand motioned to a purple dot further up on the map. “It looks like the technomancer is hunkering down up here in the mountainous area, probably to try and avoid Firr while he waited for us to come in. Either way let’s get out of here, we’ve already spent too long here and no doubt the skunk has found some means to track us.”

The two peeked up from their hiding spot and, after Draggor showed Alkali how to spawn and cycle through his weapons, began to make the way towards the mountain range that loomed in the distance. As they ran, keeping to cover when they could, they could hear the repeated sounds of gunfire and fighting… but when Draggor brought up the minimap he saw that both Xander and Zen were still on the move and not in the area where they heard it. That meant that there was someone else fighting in this server, the question was who were they and how did they manage to get there?

As another explosion rocked the area next to them however their focus became once more on just regrouping with the others and getting to where Serathin was held up. They hoped that Xander and Zen would wait for them, but the demon realized that they probably didn’t know how to use the minimap while in full immersion mode or really any of the other features other then the brief tutorial he had given them. He felt bad that he thrown them in without a better primer but with what he saw in the coding of the game he knew they didn’t have much time left before this entire thing collapsed. As though to make that point clear as they walked by a river of lava both of them had to brace themselves as an entire chunk of the world dropped away and filled with the glowing liquid.

When the two did manage to get up to where Xander and Zen were they found the dragon and fox fighting with some of the lower-level imps in the game, but as they fought with their bare hands since they didn’t know how to get their guns they saw the creatures were not normal monsters. They resembled skunks in nature, their monstrous features smoothed over and erased until they looked more like blank synths or avatars. The skin of the creature was also not the usual scales with spikes coming out but was a shiny black with two white stripes running down the back… and as Xander grabbled with one of the larger ones they could see that it was spreading onto his hands. The same thing was happening with Zen, one of his eyes actually glowing as red as the one trying to bite him as more of the corrupted data transferred to him.

That was enough for both Alkali and Draggor as they took their weapons and blasted all the creatures around them, leaving the two avatars panting on the ground after they had been released from the grasp of the skunk drones. “That was… very strange,” Zen said as Draggor helped him to his feet. “It reminded me of when I was sitting in front of that console before Serathin shot it…”

“Yeah, me too,” Xander admitted as Alkali did the same for him to get him back up. “It reminded me all too well when Firr had taken over my cybernetics.”

“Yeah, we had seen before that he figured out how to spread his programming to sprites when he attempted to ambush Serathin,” Draggor explained. “It appears in the time that we spent getting here his knowledge of such a thing has grown exponentially. If he ever gets to a game that had matrix multiplayer…”

“He might not even need Kataze’s hardware to take over people,” Alkali finished. “Now he might have a foothold in on you guys because you’ve fallen under his influence before, but if that’s all it takes then we definitely need to stop him right here, right now.”

“Yeah!” Zen shouted, raising his fist in the air before pointing at Draggor. “Now tell me how to make those guns appear!”

After Draggor showed him how to use the immersion commands so that they were all armed they continued on their path towards the mountains, though they were encountering more resistance as they did. Firr had not just settled on making a few of the randomly spawning monsters his own, as they snuck by one of the lava pools that would be where they came from they watched as one popped up only to be immediately ambushed upon by several of the skunk drones. They didn’t kill it either, instead they watched as they continued to grapple it until it had become like one of them and then went off to fight while the others waited for the next one to grab. Firr had completely highjacked the way the game was played, and it would only get worse as they fought through several groups of the strange drones until they got to a cave in the foothills of the mountain where they could take a second to rest and reload.

“This situation is getting worse by the second,” Xander said as he looked out of the cave entrance, making sure not to get spotted and reveal their position while looking back at the others. “How are we supposed to take down this technomancer if he’s building an army to fight us? There’s only four of us and even if Draggor can get some of his console commands to work unless he can make us a nuclear bomb I don’t think we’re going to make it.”

“A nuclear bomb?” Zen scoffed. “Preposterous!” The fox then looked over at the demon working on the virtual desktop. “Unless…”

“No nukes.” Draggor replied, causing Zen to huff. “Now I don’t think Serathin would have us all come in here unless he had some sort of plan, so let’s just find him and see what it is before we all get turned into skunk drones or something.”

“Easy for you to say,” Alkali said. “You’ve probably climbed all sorts of virtual mountains, I haven’t even gotten over a virtual molehill yet.”

As Draggor tried to explain that wasn’t how it worked in the Matrix they suddenly heard something coming from deeper within the cave. Even with having taking a look inside they hadn’t gone all the way in, and had no intention too, but with all the fighting going on near the other face of the mountain they thought they had snuck through the bulk of Firr’s growing forces. The four of them readied their weapons and aimed at the darkness of the cave, their fingers on the triggers to blast away whatever was coming out at them. As they continued to slowly back their way to the entrance of the cave a flare was suddenly lit, illuminating the two creatures that were standing there.

“Do not engage,” the two armed individuals said, who looked a lot like the drones that they had just been fighting except they looked like someone else. “We’re here to guide you up to the one that you’re looking for.”

“It appears that our friend has been busy too,” Zen said as he looked at the saber teeth of the ones that motioned to follow them. “At least now we know where all the fighting is coming from.”

The others just nodded and wordlessly followed the two programs up through the cave, which quickly lost the appearance of the rock that was an asset of the game and became smooth, worked stone instead, and eventually found themselves going up an elevator shaft. When they attempted to talk to the drones they found that they didn’t speak, which Draggor pointed out was not their intended function in the first place. Even when they were just imps the only thing they did was growl and snarl, and likely what they heard was a message given by the their technomancer in order to point them in the direction of where they needed to go. That turned out to be at the top of the mountain, their jaws dropping slightly in awe as they saw an actual castle that was built into the side of it.

Eventually they were led to an antechamber where Serathin stood, his eyes glowing brightly as he worked with what looked like another visage similar to those that led them there. When he saw that they were standing there he quickly waved his hand and made it disappear before giving them a small nod. “Weclome to the chateau Sabrewolf,” Serathin said. “When I saw that Firr was importing assets from other games into this one I thought I would do the same, a rather ingenious way of conserving power when not connected to the Matrix. Same for his little drones that he’s been mass producing.”

“Something else that you’ve taken from him,” Alkali said as he gestured to the two that guided them here. “So Draggor said that you had a plan? It seems like you two are kind of already at a war of the worlds, not sure how we’re going to help.”

“Actually it’s you guys that are going to be the ones that have to enact this plan,” Serathin explained. “Once we start engaging with Firr I’m not going to be able to help at all with it. Speaking of such, I’m hoping that you brought the package I requested?”

Xander nodded and motioned behind him towards the hallway they had come in. “Figured that I would leave it out there for the time being,” the dragon said. “So how are you-“

There was a large boom and everyone had to brace themselves as the stone shook underneath their feet. At first they thought Firr had somehow managed to lob some sort of explosive, but when they looked out at the balcony that was part of the castle they saw one of the nearby mountains actually collapse on itself. “This Matrix simulation is going to hell really quick,” Draggor stated as they watched the dust cloud spread through the area. “And since this is supposed to be one of the realms of hell, that’s really saying something.”

“Well then, looks like we’re not going to have a lot of time to stage this,” Serathin stated. “Draggor, I’m going to toss you the algorithms that I stole from Firr so that you can import weapons from other games that you can use to arm the others. I’ll go get my part ready.”

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A few minutes later the army of Firr had breached through the drones that Serathin had created to keep them at bay, getting around the mountain that had been destroyed as well to find the castle that he had been trying to reach this entire time. The rival technomancer along with the hacker that had put him in here in the first place were the only ones that stood in his way and kept him here just like the others had attempted to do before. He would not be denied though… and with several that he had already possessed foolishly entering the game with him all he had to do was take down either the cyborg dragon or the technomancer and use their bodies to escape this place permanently. This time he was going to be smart though, the second that he got out he was going to use whatever body he took and completely vacate the area before disappearing into the Matrix.

…well, maybe not right away, the skunk thought to himself as he imagined the damage he could do. A smirk came to his muzzle when he imagined tearing a path with Xander’s augmented body or using Serathin’s abilities to augment his own and wreak havoc on the Matrix. The best part would be that they would be the ones blamed for it and they would go to jail, leaving him free to do whatever he wanted! Firr couldn’t help but laugh loudly as he was brought forth to the castle that he was besieging, the programs that he had corrupted marching in front of him.

“My friends!” Firr shouted as he saw all five of them walking down the path, all of them armed with various weapons that looked like they belonged out of a fantasy RPG or sci-fi game. “It warms my heart that you would come down here and greet me willingly! I thought for sure I would have to go up there into the castle and keep fighting all the way down to the last man before I took out your entire party.”

“Well I wouldn’t want you to get tired,” Serathin stated as he raised a hand in the air, several dozen of his own drones coming forward in front of them. “So we decided to bring the party to you.”

“That’s copyright infringement by the way,” Firr stated as he pointed at the other drones. “I’m so going to sue you.”

“Sue me?!” Serathin shouted back. “Are you kidding-“

“Not now Serathin!” Alkali said before turning back to the skunk. “We’re going to give you one last chance Firr, if you go into the datadrive that is still plugged into Draggor’s laptop then we’ll see about bringing you to someone that can help with your condition. If you don’t… then we’re going to have to see this to the end.”

“Ah, so you want me to go back into a box that I had spent years trying to get out of after being tricked by Kataze,” Firr replied, leaning forward and clapping his hands together. “Or, I can take out your little knock-offs there and then ride one of you back into the real world so that I can make my escape and burn KatazCorp to the ground right before taking what is rightfully mine, which is the world.” The skunk feigned thinking about it for a second before sticking his tongue out. “Nah, I think that I’m going to stick with my plan, thanks though!”

With that Firr pointed forward and announced for them to charge, all the skunk drones doing so at the same time. Though Serathin still had a number of his own they were clearly outnumbered, especially as the two sides clashed together and began fighting. With drones on neither side having guns, the programs only there to hack and slash at players originally, the entire battlefield became mass chaos as one side fought the other. The five of them nodded to one another and while Serathin stayed back the other four charged in to join the fray. Alkali and Draggor both stayed back and used the futuristic ray guns that the demon had stolen from a different game to try and thin the crowd while Zen used an oversized, enchanted version of his own battle axe to cut a swathe through the enemies while Xander was content to slice through them with modified claw and tail blades.

With four actual players using over-powered weapons Firr saw that his armies needed a little help, so as his eyes glowed with an amber hue he twisted his hands and caused several closest to Xander and Zen to merge together. In a matter of seconds the recompiled code looked more like a skunk ogre then a mere drone, and though Zen had managed to block the huge fist that had barreled towards him the dragon got clipped while trying to jump back and went sailing through the air. As he skidded to the ground the hulking creature lumbered forward ready to smash him down into the ground. Just as he was about to throw down his fists however he was hit with a bright red blast that caused him to stumble backwards, followed by a second one and a third as Alkali advanced with the laser rifle he had gotten from Draggor.

“Ohhhh, you guys are so cheating!” Firr said, pointing at them.

“You started it!” Serathin shot back, crossing his arms.

“And now I’m finishing it!” Firr said as yellow energy cascaded from his fingers, causing the actual landscape around them to deform around them.

“Guys,” Draggor said as he continued to shoot at the mutating drones to keep them off of Xander and Zen. “He’s trying to crash the game!”

“We’re not there yet!” Serathin stated as he continued to stand there. “He’s still too powerful, you have to drain him further!”

The malevolent code that was being spread by the skunk suddenly stopped as he stiffed, looking straight at the technomancer that was continuing to stand there while the others fought. “So that’s the plan, huh?” Firr said as he floated up into the air. “Going to try and make me use up all my power, knowing that we’re disconnected from the Matrix?”

“I mean, yeah,” Serathin replied as he bobbed his head back and forth slightly. “After you disabled the ability to capture you then there wasn’t really much we can do. As you can see we’re going to win this, and with every one of your drones that we kill we remove some of the instability from this game.”

Firr looked down at the battlefield and saw that he was right; even with his augmented programs the modified creatures he had created were no match for intellect of real people and the weapons that they had brought in. Draggor had also modified their avatars in order to be even faster and stronger then the game allowed, something that he could only do once he was in the game since the skunk had shut down his connection from the real world. At the same time the rivers of lava that had been exploding and the land that had been breaking away was already starting to reconstitute itself as well, being strengthened by the power of the technomancer that was standing back to conserve his energy. But as the rage clearly continued to boil inside of him Firr saw something that he realized the others in their foolishness had not anticipated.

The four that were fighting craned their heads upwards suddenly as Firr streaked over them and went right for Serathin. With all of them currently engaged, Alkali and Draggor keeping the bigger creatures off of Zen and Xander while they dealt with the smaller ones, none of them could break away as the skunk charged forward and slammed into the hybrid. The force of the impact caused them to tumble into the crater left behind by the destruction of the mountain, the two tumbling down until they came to rest at a pile of rubble at the bottom with the skunk on top of the draconic sabrewolf. Before Serathin could react Firr clasped his hands around his neck and began to squeeze as his eyes glowed with a bright golden yellow.

“You think you won,” the skunk said with an almost manic grin as lines of code swirled around them. “But I know that you used those gloves to chase me, which means your body is just sitting there waiting for someone to occupy it. Don’t worry though, I’ll make sure to take good care of it once you’re gone…”

The sabrewolf continued to squirm under his grasp, but as Firr continued to push his essence to inhabit the body of the avatar he was corrupting his triumphant smile turned into a frown. There was something definitely wrong as he didn’t feel any push back, no resistance from his possession into his body to effectively strand him there. As he heard a whistle from above the skunk looked up to see the draconic sabrewolf standing there at the lip of the crater, grinning and waving down to him. “Looks like you got the wrong enemy there!” He shouted down at him.

When Firr looked back down at the one that he was on top of he arched back and gasped when he saw the visage of another skunk looking back up at him, Kataze’s prone form falling backwards as he tried to stop the possession process only to find himself getting sucked in. “Yeah, it was a tough effort to create a shell that was believable enough that you’d think it was me,” Serathin explained as he watched Firr getting pulled into the other skunk’s body even as he tried to pull away. “But when I knew that you were desperate enough to try and find a way out of here and remembered that I was in the same situation being disconnected from my body I was hoping that you would put the pieces together.”

“That’s where I came in,” Draggor said as he popped his head up over the lip of the crater, seeing that almost half of Firr’s body had disappeared as the coding continued to get absorbed into Kataze’s avatar. “When you disabled the spawning system I had this net for you that wasn’t being used, so instead I installed it into Kataze’s implants using the same markers that I found in Xander’s cybernetics when you had possessed him while we were coming up to the sim pods. Then it was just a matter of all of us stressing you out enough to try and take the one window that we opened for you… and then shut it before you realized what was happening.”

Zen, Alkali, and Xander also came up to watch as the technomancer continued to shout at them as his fingers dug into the dirt to try and pull himself away, even as his chest and shoulders were pulled into the implants of the unconscious skunk. “Not him!” Firr shouted as the last of his head was pulled inside, his mouth still moving as it was stretched out. “Anyone but Katazeeeeee!”

The drones that had been corrupted by Firr immediately dissipated as the technomancer was black boxed inside the implant of the other skunk, which ironically was used to control drones before Draggor went in and made sure it was disabled along with any other connectivity. “He is going to have one screaming headache when he wakes up,” Alkali said with a shrug. “Of course that’s going to be caused mainly by the angry technomancer that we stuck in there.”

“Yeah… they at the very least have a lot of talking to do considering that one betrayed the other,” Xander stated. “Anyway… can we please get the heck out of here now? I think I’ve experienced enough immersion gameplay for the next century.”

“Really?” Alkali said with a grin as he put his arm around the dragon. “I was just starting to get used to it myself.”

The others just chuckled and all of them said the command word in order to log off of the system, all of them coming out of the sim pods save for Kataze. They decided to leave him in there for the time being, Draggor and Zen going back and disabling the pod from connecting to the Matrix after force disconnecting the two skunks inhabiting one body. “Well, I think that about settles it,” Serathin said. “Let’s find the evidence we need to clear our names on the mainframe, then leak it to the press along with all the highly illegal stuff that they were doing at that fusion power plant.”

“Wait a second,” Draggor stated. “What are we going to do about the mainframe that has all that meteorite circuitry in it? We can’t just leave it down there for someone to find, otherwise we might have to do this all over again even if Kataze somehow doesn’t dodge the charges that are about to be thrown at him.”

“Oh, I think I know what to do,” Zen said with a wink. “Just leave it to me.”

About ten minutes later the five of them walked out of the main doors of KatazCorp, nodding to the paramedics that had just put the last of the security guards into an ambulance before riding off. With the product launch already concluded and most people having been partied out the streets were mostly empty. They were soon followed by a horde of KatazCorp employees that had awoken from their hypnotically induced stupor, the power of which likely wearing off since Kataze’s files didn’t have the same power that Firr had. It also helped that they had pulled the fire alarm as they were leaving to prompt them all to exit the building as well.

“You know…” Alkali said as he watched the last of the employees leave, including a panda that continued to shout at random people and say that he loved them. “If Kataze and Firr had just worked together instead of doing what they did, then their plan would have went off with a hitch and they would have probably ruled this city easily. Turns out they were their own worst enemies… hopefully they don’t get it in their heads to try.”

“Yeah yeah always work together and teamwork and all that stuff,” Xander said as he held his stomach. “Can we please go somewhere to eat? I’m starving and haven’t eaten since I got possessed by a skunk at an abandoned fusion plant and technomancer prison.”

“I could stand to eat too,” Serathin chimed in. “I do know this great noodle place…”

“No.” Alkali said immediately, several others resonating that sentiment as the sabrewolf huffed and crossed his arms. “We can decide what we’re going to eat later, for now let’s just blow this joint.”

“You got it!” Zen said as he held up a remote, flicking the switch and pressing down on the trigger. In the next second there was a thunderous boom as one side of the skyscraper exploded, a fireball rising up along the side of it as C-4 that the fox had placed in the server room destroyed several floors of the building. The five of them immediately started running towards the nearest subway station as every alarm in a two-block radius went off from it…

Chapter 14:

“There are still no reports yet on what has happened to founder and CEO of KatazCorp after their highly anticipated product launch ended in an explosion that destroyed the entire mainframe of the company,” the wolfess said as she looked at the news camera pointed at her. “As of right now he’s been hospitalized after an incident in the headquarters of KatazCorp rendered dozens of people with acute memory loss as well as several other symptoms. Recent leaks within the company have suggested that Kataze himself was involved in a clandestine operation that involved the defunct fusion plant outside of city limits, as well as outlandish reports that the CEO as well as several others were attempting to research mental manipulation techniques to be used on the general public. We now go live to Jonas who is standing outside of KatazCorp.”

The scene on the screen switched to that of a bull standing outside of a damaged skyscraper, fire trucks and other emergency vehicles parked behind him. “Thanks Clara,” Jonas said. “Emergency vehicles responded to an alarm that was the result of an explosion that has rendered the entire skyscraper as dangerous until further notice. When we attempted to talk to one of the responders on the scene he said that no one was hurt and that though they are citing that it was a server malfunction that caused an electrical overload the investigation is still ongoing. In what appears to be a separate matter, dozens of KatazCorp employees were found on the streets when the explosion happened and sources say that they were all presenting with symptoms including dizziness, memory loss, confusion, and even fugue states in several. More information when it comes, until then back to you.”

“Thank you Jonas,” the anchor replied before looking back at the screen. “With several inquiries now ongoing the disappearance of the CEO has caused the public to lose its trust in the entertainment megacorp, prompting a selloff of their stock for the entirety of the day. In a statement released to the public the CFO of KatazCorp had this to say.”

Once more the scene changed, this time to the outside of a courthouse as a panda stood in front of a podium while straightening his tie. “At this time the CEO of KatazCorp has been admitted to medical treatment that is not related to the events that happened at KatazCorp headquarters on the day in question,” Pandez stated. “He is currently resting and recovering at a private residence, and when he is ready to answer questions he will come forth and do so. Until then I will be acting as CEO and with the full backing of the megacorp board of directors we will continue to move forward, including a complete redesign of the product that has come under question in order to meet federal and megacity guidelines.”

The crowd erupted into questions, but those watching the television were unable to see it at Zen turned off the television. “Can you believe that they didn’t mention once that we were no longer being investigated?!” the fox practically roared. “Outrageous!”

“Also can you believe that part about Kataze resting and recovering in a private residence?” Serathin scoffed. “Most people call it a loony bin, but I suppose he probably has a wing all to himself… well, a wing for the two of them to share. I hear they still can’t figure out how to separate the two.”

As the two continued to discuss the matter they heard a chime at the front door, prompting them to leave the partially constructed room they were working on to answer it. “Howdy neighbors!” Alkali said as he and Xander walked in, shaking their hands and hugging as they were invited inside. “How are you enjoying Cerberus Alley?”

“Well it doesn’t quite have the foot traffic that the entertainment district had,” Zen said with a slight shrug. “But I think that we can certainly make it work, especially since my last building looked more like swiss cheese instead of a Sim Den. How are the repairs coming to your shop by the way?”

“Back to brokering information there in a matter of weeks,” Alkali informed them. “Luckily the explosion only took out the front part of the shop, so I’ve even been able to do a little work in the down time. Apparently there is a huge market for anything related to KatazCorp right now, and wouldn’t you know it, that happens to be my specialty at the moment.”

“He’s been beaming about it ever since the Matrix released those first rumors about what happened,” Xander added. “Nice touch making it look like they came from internal memos by the way.”

“Thank you,” Serathin replied with a smirk. “To be fair it actually was, just didn’t want them to look like we had taken them first. But we’re not here to just pat one another on our backs, we have something that we wanted to show you.”

The two took the ferret and dragon through the lobby, past the partially renovated entertainment area and towards the actual Sim Den. Though Alkali and Xander weren’t sure what they were in for when they were escorted back, but when they went through the door their jaws immediately dropped almost to the floor. “No way…” Alkali said as he looked as the sleek, shiny sim pods that looked rather familiar. “These aren’t… they can’t be…”

“If you’re thinking that these are the sim pods that we used at KatazCorp you would be wrong,” Draggor stated as he suddenly popped his head up from one of the control consoles. “When we figured out that Firr was looking for where Kataze had stored the hardware in order to spread the hypnotic commands we decided to go take a look for ourselves.”

“Then when we saw all these sim pods that were probably just going to be destroyed in the cover up and since they owed me a few new ones I just decided to take these,” Zen said as he slapped a hand against one of them. “Quite the trade-off if you ask me. What do you think?”

“Are you sure that these are safe?” Alkali said as he looked at them wearily. “They were created for the specific purpose of brainwashing people.”

“Nah, they’re fine,” Serathin stated. “Looked them over myself. Seems like Kataze still hadn’t been sure of the potency of his product yet and hadn’t loaded anything up in them, so they’re as clean as a mineral spring. Of course they are still technically stolen, which is one of the reasons why the change of scenery to your lovely little neck of the woods.”

Even though the two still had their apprehensions the other three managed to assure them that it was safe, to the point where they suggested that they take them out for a spin now that the demon had connected them to the new mainframe. The five chose which one they wanted before hopping in, the ferret feeling confident after having already experienced it several times before during their harrowing experience. He couldn’t help but notice that the KatazCorp logo had been completely filed off the side of the one he climbed in as Xander asked if he needed any help, the ferret shaking his head before sliding into the gel-lined pod. Once he was settled in, along with all the others, the pod doors closed at the same time and Alkali found himself in the increasingly familiar darkness once more.

It only lasted for a few seconds before he found himself in a park, this time immediately able to walk down the path where he already saw the others gathering. Since they hadn’t connected to the main Network node yet they were completely alone, which was fine for the moment as they got to enjoy the scenery without interruption. The ferret didn’t think the immersion experience could get any more real then what he had already had with the other times, but with the aid of the new technology it was clear that this really was cutting edge. He and Xander even enjoyed a swim in a lake that became as expansive as an ocean when they dived down inside of it.

They continued their festivities all the way into the night, which was synchronized with the actual time as they talked about what their plans were now that they were no longer chased by a malevolent megacorp CEO or a deranged technomancer. For the most part their lives seemed to be going back to normal, the only one with a real change was Zen with his location. Serathin had also considered moving into Cerberus Alley as well, leaving his life of isolation in order to help the fox out with this new venture in exchange for his usual tinkering. Eventually the night grew long and people started to wonder off once more, enjoying an impromptu fireworks display that was a part of the park package they had installed.

“I suppose that it’s time for us to head out,” Alkali said to Zen, Draggor having exited the simulation and Serathin wandering off a while ago. “Thanks again for helping us out back there, I don’t think we could have done it without you or Serathin’s help.”

“Don’t mention it!” Zen replied as he held up his tankard. “I suppose I should be going too, big opening coming soon!”

“Sure sure,” Alkali said as he looked around. “Is Serathin still here? I wanted to thank him too.”

The fox waved his hand in the air and brought up the internal server menu, looking at the info box that said who was in the sim pods. “Says he’s still here,” Zen stated as he waved it off. “Check the amphitheater, he likes fiddling with things there since the gazebo area can be turned into a secure node.”

The ferret thanked him and used the teleportation function to get there instantly, seeing that there was a light on the stage where the fox said there would be. When he went downwards he saw the light dissipate and the hybrid walk over to the edge of it to greet him. “Hey there Alkali,” Serathin said. “You guys leaving?”

“Yeah, time to call it a night,” Alkali stated. “Just wanted to say thanks for what you did back there with KatazCorp, you definitely helped us out there and you could have just left us to rot at that noodle shop.”

“To be fair if I had done that then Firr would have never of escaped the fusion plant,” Serathin said with a smirk. “Of course then Kataze would have released his product and enslaved the city. So… horse a piece I guess.”

“I guess,” the ferret chuckled. “Well, don’t work too hard out here, and I suppose I’ll be seeing you later.”

Serathin nodded and watched as Alkali turned and left, his glowing green eyes continuing to stare right up until he left the amphitheater and returned back to where Xander and Zen were in the park. Once he was assured that he was alone he went back over to the middle of the gazebo and snapped his fingers, unshrouding the data that he had copied and stolen from both Firr and Kataze while he interacted with them on the Matrix. “I think you’re right Alkali,” Serathin said as an evil grin crept across his face. “You are definitely going to be seeing a lot of me…”

THE END