Chapter 4:

As the night passed and the new day dawned it was clear it appeared that their first incursion into the casino went unnoticed, especially when Draggor attempted to login and found his access granted.  With this newfound freedom they were able to spy on the casino and see everything from the patterns of the security guards to the vendors that were in the convention center. Though they had their eyes in the sky the demon found that their access was good for only that, the second that he attempted to change anything in the system he almost got flagged and his credentials deleted.  But a victory was still a victory and the five met in the hangar to discuss what to do next.

“Alright guys, so far it seems like we have everything that we need under control,” Alkali said as the others sat around the planning table.  “Zen, how is our tunnel coming along?”

“Well since some people here won’t let me use my explosive charges to speed things along,” Zen reported, looking at the others that just shook their heads.  “But we’re doing alright, the huscoon squad has been a huge help hauling dirt out here.”

The five looked at the group of hybrids that were standing on top of the mound that the fox had just mentioned, the one known as Erik shouting that he was king of the hill while the others scrambled up it to try and take him down.  “Right… Serathin, you got your plan all laid out?” The ferret asked as he turned his attention back to the table.

“You got it,” Serathin replied after licking on a cherry freeze pop.  “Once I hear my queue I go through the elevator and down the service entrance, then hop into the utility hallway and wiggle my way into the safe itself.  As long as you guys keep the guards distracted I should be in and out in time to get the package.”

“Perfect,” Alkali said as he let out a small breath of satisfaction.  “Xander will be at the concert to help keep things on point and Draggor will be in the hotel room keeping an eye on all the electronics.  I don’t want to jinx things here, but I think we’re good.”

“You guys are screwed,” a voice said from the hangar door, the five turning to see Nizzbit standing there with a tablet in his hands.

“Whoa, wait, what?” Alkali said as he shook his head in surprise, practically seizing as the tiger walked up to their table and put down a set of papers.

The five opened up the rolls of papers and looked at a set of plans that they hadn’t seen before.  “What exactly are we looking at?” Draggor asked. “All I see is the stage that they’re going to put the concert in.”

“Exactly,” Nizzbit replied as he tapped on the label that was at the bottom.  “Look at where they’re putting it.”

As they glanced down at the location all five eventually had a look of shock on their faces at what they saw.  “No way…” Xander said as Draggor ran to his computer and began to type furiously on the keyboard. The other four looked on nervously as they waited for the demon to confirm the information that the tiger had found for them.

“It’s true…” Draggor said as he sat back in his chair and put his hands on his face.  “They moved the concert to the field instead of the casino amphitheater. They’re expecting above average crowds and Miko opened the concert to the public to capitalize on it.”

“Well this is certainly not going to work then,” Zen bolstered as he threw his arms in the air.  “How am I supposed to get to the safe? The concert was supposed to be above our heads, not hundreds of feet away.”

“Forget your stupid bombs,” Serathin replied.  “I’m supposed to be using music cues to get to the vault, there’s no way I’m going to hear the concert from my location and there’s too much of delay to try and relay it through comms.  We already tried doing it that way and the timing just doesn’t match up.”

The complaints reached a crescendo until finally Alkali told them all to stop, the ferret holding up his arms to emphasize the need for quiet as the others stopped talking.  “I will admit… this is a bit of setback,” he said, holding up his finger when the others practically jumped to start talking again. “I think that we need more information though to know what’s going on, perhaps we need a little inside information.”

“We’re going to use Pandez again?” Xander asked, Alkali shaking his head.

“No…” Alkali replied.  “This time I actually know someone in town who might be willing to work with us in this endeavor.”  The ferret took off his hand and pressed his hand against his face as he rubbed his muzzle. “I just really, really don’t want to have to foot the bar tab for this one…”

The others looked at Alkali in question, but instead of receiving an explanation the ferret just told Xander to grab his stuff.  Together the two traveled to a bar nearby the Golden Cheese casino, Alkali making a call from the car while they drove there. Once they arrived they ordered three drinks, two for them and then a particular wine for the one that they were waiting for.

“Well what do I see here?” the two turned to see a cockroach in a lab coat, the older gentleman coming in and grabbing the glass before even looking at the other two.  “It appears that you finally got it right Alkali, you’re a good man.” Both dragon and ferret waited as he took a sip, swirling around the contents of the glass. “Mmmm, Mosul Valley too, fantastic.”

“Well I’m glad I could make you happy Uncle Kage,” Alkali said as the bug man finally looked at him.  “Now before you drink away all the profits I want to discuss with you some help that we need. You have the celebrity clout we need to get backstage so that we can see what’s going on with the sudden move of this concert.”

“Are you talking about the Foxes and Pepper’s concert for the last day of the SEE conference?” Kage mused, the two nodding.  “Well I did happen to receive an invite, have it right in my pocket, though I wonder why you might be asking me for such information.”

“Well if you want we can explain it over another glass,” Alkali said as he gestured to the one that Kage was already holding.

The cockroach looked over at the now half-empty glass, then back at Alkali.  “Make it another bottle and you got yourself an antenna bent your way,” Kage said, Alkali rolling his eyes as he pointed to the bottle while he began to explain what he needed him to do.

A few hours later Xander and Kage were walking through the concourse of the convention center, the dragon keeping a few steps behind while the cockroach talked to those that he passed by.  It provided a type of social camouflage and Xander made sure to stay in the wake of it until they got to their destination, hoping that all eyes stayed on Kage instead of him. Their target was one of the areas where the casino met with the convention center, the place where they were setting up for the concert.  With Kage leading the charge the two managed to get past the initial security, and while the insect shared an anecdote with them to keep them distracted the dragon moved further in.

The back of the convention center was bustling with activity, various people doing everything from equipment check to moving boxes around in order to make room.  The inside of the convention center still had the vendors in them but their space was already being encroached upon by the stage that was being built. “Hey, you there!” a female voice said, Xander turning to see a lioness walking straight towards him.  “If you’re not wearing a badge you gotta leave, I don’t care how much you want to meet the musicians.”

“Oh, I’m with Uncle Kage, actually,” Xander replied as he motioned towards the cockroach and the small crowd he had gathered around him.  “I’m his personal assistant, you know, making sure his wine is always stocked and his lab coat pressed. Anyway… yeah, he wanted to make use of his invitation to see the two and wish them good luck before the concert.”

“Well alright then,” the lioness replied as she reached out a hand to shake his.  “You can call me Dixie, I’m the event coordinator for the convention center and the casino.  I don’t want to be rude to Uncle Kage but we’re actually in the middle of a major move from the grand hall to the convention center and I got vendors screaming at me on one side and convention staff screaming at me on the other.  Now I don’t know where the musicians are but before you go any further you have to check in with the front desk and get a pass.”

Xander nodded, though he had no intention of doing so since his name wouldn’t be on the list.  “I actually heard about that you guys had to move,” he said as he attempted to pump more information from the coordinator.  “Something about the size not being big enough to hold everyone?”

“Hardly,” Dixie scoffed, pausing to yell at someone improperly moving boxes towards the stage before turning back to him.  “Though opening it to the public is going to increase sales they probably could have still fit everything in the grand hall.  But if they want to move an entire venue because the boss man has a bout of paranoia, who am I to argue?”

The dragon quickly thanked the feline for the information and left Uncle Kage to continue to talk, allowing it to once more give him the cover to leave unnoticed.  Though he now knew the real reason for the move it didn’t serve to help, and even with Uncle Kage’s assistance there’s no way that they could move it back to the original location.  That meant that the concert wouldn’t be held over the security vault and disguise their break in, at least not in its current state. He just shook his head at the problems that were stacking up and decided to go back to the hangar in order to report on what he found out.

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“Well this is still not good,” Draggor said as he sat in front of his computer.  “It sounds like Miko knows we’re coming, we might need to consider calling this off.”

“If we abort now it’s years of planning down the drain,” Alkali replied as he started to pace back and forth.  “We might never get this chance again and besides, if Miko knew what we were doing he could have arrested me or Xander at any time.  I think he’s just being an overly-careful little rat…”

“To be fair we are trying to rob him,” Serathin spoke up from the back, the others looking at him.  “I mean… I’m just saying that in this incident he’s kind of justified.”

“C’mon guys,” Alkali stated.  “We’ve already invested so much time and so many resources into this crazy plan already, we can’t just turn our backs on it.  We still have one more day before the concert and the release of the information to the public, there has to be something that we can do.”

As the others put their heads down in thought it was quickly interrupted by Uncle Kage waltzing into the area.  “Perhaps you can’t do anything to help with your predicament,” the cockroach said as he put his arms in the air,  “But you’ll find that I’m able to do something in your stead.”

“Whoa, Uncle Kage is helping us?” Serathin exclaimed.  “That’s a surprise!”

“You’ll find that I’m full of them, my lad,” Kage replied before turning his attention back to the others.  “And one is that since the grand hall in the casino has now been vacated, I’m going to be throwing a little party in order to thank Pepper and Fox for what I’m sure is going to be a wonderful concert.”

“You really rented out the grand hall?”  Zen asked in slight amazement.

“Not I,” Kage responded.  “That tiger friend of yours that you referred me to for my wine set everything up, I told him that you’d be more than willing to foot the bill for it.”

“Gee, thanks…” Alkali said as he rolled his eyes.

“No problem!” Kage said enthusiastically.  “I’ve also come bearing another gift for you, I would like to introduce you to a dear, dear friend of mine that I think can help you.  Ronnie, come on out!”

As they looked back over at the door they watched as a red-scaled Eastern dragon appeared, walking up to the side of the insect and waving his hand.  “Ronnie is here to help you with anything that would require a bit of a brave soul,” Kage explained. “We happened to be traveling together and when I told him the situation he was more than happy to lend a hand.”

“I look forward to it,” Ronnie replied.  “I was told that I should report to Serathin?”

“Right here, dude,” Serathin said as he waved his hand in the air.  “Question: Do you get motion sick, are afraid of heights, bruise easily, or get scared of your potential immediate death?”

The Eastern dragon glanced around at the others to see if the sabrewolf was serious and when everyone remained stone-faced he glanced back to the hybrid.  “Um… no?” he stated in question.

“Perfect,” Serathin replied.  “Come over here and see if you fit this harness.  Also we have freeze pops, do you want grape or blue?  We’re… out of cherry.”

The rest of the group watched the dragon make his way over to the makeshift platforms that Serathin had created in the bunker, then once more turned towards one another.  “So we have a means to do what we need to do at the casino now,” Draggor said as they went back to the blueprints on the table itself. “Might even be better, since now we have more control over the area if the concert was to play there.  Do we have any idea how we’re going to implement the rest of the plan, though?”

“Well guys,” Alkali said, everyone looking at the ferret as he paused, then shook his head.  “I have no idea. We need to find a way to get Serathin those cues and even if Kage can get Fox and Pepper to play outside of the concert, we have no idea if they’re going to want to play the song we need.”

“It sounds like we need a plan B.” Kage replied after taking a sip of wine.  “Why don’t you come with me to the casino and see the room for yourself? That way you can see what needs to be done without having to work off of lines on paper.  Don’t you think that would be easier?”

“I’m going to need to bring Serathin,” Alkali sighed as he scratched his chin.  “I don’t like the idea of bringing along someone who’s going to be breaking into the place tomorrow.”

“I don’t see what the problem is!” Zen chimed in, looking up from the device he was working on.  “It’s not like our sabertoothed friend is going to be anywhere that cameras would pick him up, and if they did we have bigger problems on our hands!  Plus it will give me a chance to show Xander and Draggor the progress that we made on the tunnel, if the huscoon squad stuck to the schedule we should be seeing the end of the road.”

The others agreed and though the ferret still didn’t seem keen on the plan, he shouted over for Serathin to come and follow him to the casino.  They took Uncle Kage’s mode of transportation and drove into the city, Alkali and Serathin being dropped off a block away from the actual casino to keep their connection as much of a secret as possible.  Though it felt like they were being overly paranoid the ferret reminded himself of all the potential jail time they could rack up with their plan and suddenly it seemed like they weren’t being cautious enough.  For Serathin it appeared he didn’t seem to mind the cameras at all, though it didn’t take long for Alkali to see that his steps meandered this way and that, ensuring he remained in the blind spots of most of the eyes in the sky.

For Serathin it was mostly instinct that kept him out the line of sight of the cameras that were there to monitor the gamblers in the casino; it wasn’t the first time he had knocked one off before, although this one was far more complex than merely sneaking into a few rooms and knicking a few things.  There was one thing that continued to distract him, though, his ears twitching slightly when he looked at the video slot machines. He found himself drifting towards one of the large ones in the middle with a giant display but was quickly reined in by the ferret as they went to the area where the conference center and casino are connected.  Despite the sabrewolf saying that it would be a great way to keep themselves looking inconspicuous Alkali reminded him that they weren’t there to gamble or look at shiny things as they continued down the path towards the main gala hall.

With it being the largest space on the casino side of the property it often catered to performances such as the concert that was being played there, though it could be used for large parties and large gatherings in general.  That was what the room was being converted into at the moment as the rows of seats that were turned towards the stage were being taken apart and hauled away. The entire area was buzzing with activity as they walked inside and they could see a number of people that they recognized starting to put up banners and other decorations.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Kage said as he walked up to them once more.  “I took the liberty of flying in my own crew when I realized that it was going to take a party to pull off what you wanted.  Don’t worry, though, they’re resolute workers that I trust with my life, and more importantly, my stuff.”

“Appreciate it, Kage,” Alkali replied.  “Now I better take this one and see what we need to do while you set up.”

The ferret and cockroach parted ways and after the ferret once more dragged Serathin away from the door that opened to the casino began to go through the floor plan.  “So right underneath our feet is the security room that houses the primary vault,” the hybrid explained as they walked through the middle of the room. “Now with all the added security to make sure that the final day of the conference and the concert goes off without a hitch, the guys they normally post down there to keep watch over the carts going in and out will be topside.  Normally that’s a great thing, except that means that they also shut down the whole vault and activate the passive security system.”

“That’s what you need Draggor to bypass,” Alkali stated.

“And for Xander to do his thing as well,” Serathin added.  “I can’t give you an exact time but they need to give me every second possible to clear the room and get into the vault, once I’m inside we shouldn’t have a problem.”

“This sounds very risky,” Alkali replied.  “Can’t you just crawl through an air vent or something?”

Serathin just scoffed at that and shook his head.  “Why does everyone think that I can just shimmy my way through the ventilation system of a building?” Serathin asked rhetorically.  “If that was the case I could just break into wherever I want with no problem. I’m going to be using utility tunnels and elevator shafts to get to where I need to go, but they smartly don’t have them running in the high security section.  The musical cues will let me know when it’s safe to get to the next section since I won’t be able to communicate and I need my timer to keep track of something else.”

Alkali nodded and looked around the area, particularly where the stage was set up and the vault area that laid under their feet.  “You know… with our new plan here in this room perhaps we can cue you in another method.” The ferret stated. “That way we don’t have Draggor crunching in order to hack into the system by the time the song got to a certain point.”

“It’s going to have to be something significantly loud and easily discernible,” Serathin explained.  “It would make things so much easier if we had control over the sound.” The sabrewolf shook his head and sighed.  “Ventilation shafts… honestly, you’d have to be an actual mouse to use those.”

“A mouse you say?” a voice behind them said that caused both of them to freeze in place.  “Hopefully you’re not talking about little old me.”

The two didn’t even have to turn around to know who was behind them, but they did anyway to see the owner and proprietor of the property they were about to rob standing there with a smug look on his face.  “Didn’t mean to barge in on your conversation but you know how it is when you hear your species,” the mouse said as he extended a hand. “Miko Maus, I happen to own this little place here.”

“Oh, it’s a pleasure,” Alkali replied as quickly as he could while trying not to let his surprise show.  “I’m… Alkali and this here is my friend…”

“Arkham,” Serathin replied, shaking Miko’s hand.  “Nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” Miko replied as he looked around.  “Now while I knew that the famous Uncle Kage was going to be here in attendance of the concert I didn’t expect that he was going to rent out one of my halls to throw a party.  It’s quite the pleasant surprise.”

“Well you know how the cockroach is,” Alkali replied.  “Loves surprising people almost as much as he loves his wine.”

“Too true,” Miko responded.  “I had an entire case of Riesling brought in the second I heard of his arrival.  Speaking of knowing how people are, I think I’ve heard your name before… aren’t you the one that’s under investigation from the FCC for a number of shady trades?”

The question caught the ferret off-guard and he found himself coughing in order to stall for time before he responded.  “That was actually the company that I work for,” Alkali managed to recover. “I just happen to be one of the traders that’s on the warrant, obviously they don’t think that I’m a part of it because they let me go to this conference.”

“Perhaps…” Miko replied, the coy look still on his face.  “Although I heard from a little bird that there’s going to be some sort of bombshell that the Securities and Exchange Commission is going to drop on several high-profile investigations once they release the annual data reports.  I wonder if your name is going to be on that… I’m sure it’s going to be exciting in either case, and I hope you don’t mind if I keep my eye on you.”

Alkali frowned despite himself as the mouse smirked, questions running through his head as he tried to maintain his resolve.  How did Miko know about the investigation, and if he knew about that did he already have an idea of what they were doing here?  The ferret glanced around to see if there were any security guards waiting for them in the wings but so far it seemed that there was no one there to arrest them.  He had become so preoccupied with the potential of being hauled off in cuffs that he didn’t even realize that Miko and Serathin had been talking the entire time.

“So if I sign up as a member I can get up to a hundred dollars in free play,” Serathin said as he looked at an electronic form.  “Plus I’ll get a ten percent discount at any of the restaurants in the casino? Does that work in the convention center, too?”

“Indeed it does,” Miko replied.  “Plus since you’re here helping Uncle Kage I would be more than happy to give you and all the rest of the crew a hundred in free play so that they can enjoy the amenities of my casino while you wait for your party to start.  Just give the cashier the code I gave you and it should appear on the card automatically.”

“Hey, speaking of working,” Alkali said as he interrupted the conversation.  “Perhaps you should go and see what Uncle Kage needs you to do to help set up.  You know, like someone who works here would do.”

“But I don’t-” Serathin started to say before a glare shot at him from the ferret reminded him of where they were and what they were doing.  “Don’t have anything that I need to do right now since I’m responsible for the rigging that they’re doing on the ceiling. It might be good to see if he needs me to run and get something, though, I’ll just go now.”

Both mouse and ferret watched as the hybrid ran over to where Kage was talking to several of the workers before turning to one another.  “I like him,” Miko said with a small grin. “Seems rather straightforward in his nature, knows what he wants and walks the simplest path to get to it.  You on the other hand, you have a far more complex ideology, don’t you?”

“I know what I want, too, if that’s what you’re trying to say,” Alkali replied, still attempting to maintain his composure in front of the mouse.  “And I think that we all try to find the simplest path to get it, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps…” Miko stated simply, shrugging his shoulders.  “I suppose it depends on the nature of what someone is after and the lengths they’ll go.  You feel like someone that wouldn’t give up until they got what they wanted, even if they had to go to the ends of the earth to get it.”

Before Alkali would respond Miko’s pocket began to buzz and he looked down at it before excusing himself, mentioning he was just stopping by to see the progress of the party before heading to a meeting.  He gave the ferret a fond farewell before walking out of the hall and back into the casino, leaving Alkali standing there alone with his questions. Once it became clear that they were out of the owner’s sight the ferret motioned to Serathin to follow him out one of the doors in the hall that led to the outside of the property.  Even though he saw a look in the green eyes of the hybrid he motioned to stay quiet until they got away from the property…

Meanwhile at the butcher’s shop, or more accurately a couple hundred feet below ground and to the left of the shop, Zen, Draggor, and Xander all stood at the metal wall that was at the end of the tunnel they had just walked through.  “Isn’t it beautiful?” the fox said as he placed a hand on the cool metal. “Can you believe that there’s only a few feet of this and concrete between us and our goal?”

“...are you sure you should be touching it like that?” Draggor said as he watched Zen caress the metal.  “I thought the whole reason we couldn’t go any further was because it would set off the sensors or something.  In fact I’m wondering if we should even be talking here.”

“Relax, my friend!” Zen replied as he grabbed the demon by the shoulders and brought him close.  “We could be having a rave down here and they probably couldn’t sense it, not until we breach this first layer.  At that point, though, I’m hoping there’s someone waiting on the other side to help take all that money and bring it through.”

“It’s a shame we can’t just breach it now,” Xander said as he went up to touch the metal wall.  “But aside from setting off every alarm on the block it wouldn’t give Serathin and Draggor enough time to get to the inner vault and crack it.  Plus we would have to go through the process of bagging stuff up to haul it out, and that would take more time than we’re going to have.”

As they continued to discuss their plan they heard someone walking down through the tunnel behind them, turning to see one of the huscoons standing there.  “I have a phone call from Alkali,” he said. “He wants all of you to return to the base of operations immediately.”

“Thanks Ian,” Zen said as he turned back to the wall.

“I’m Erik, actually…” the huscoon replied, looking down.

“Sorry,” Zen quickly apologized.

“Anyway…” Xander said as he turned to the other two to change the subject.  “We should probably get going and see what the ferret wants.”

“I still have some integrity tests to do with the portable x-ray machine, you two get back and see what’s going on.”  Zen replied. “I’m sure they don’t need me for whatever it is that needs to be discussed.”

“Yeah, pretty sure you’re supposed to come along, too,” Draggor said while he started to walk back towards the butcher shop.  “We’ll help get the wall back into place to hide the tunnel.”

“I agree,” Xander chimed in.  “If the ferret is calling an emergency meeting it must be something serious, not just that he ran out of alcohol...”