Chapter 5:

“What do you mean, he saw you?” Draggor asked once everyone had gotten back to the hanger.  “Like he saw you on a camera or walking by a store or in the casino?”

“I mean he actually talked to us,” Alkali said as he held his head in his hands.  “He made us in the hall where Kage is throwing the party to cover for our break in.”

“So the guy that we’re stealing from not only knows your name and face, but also the one that’s breaking into the casino,” Xander explained.  “Plus he can link you two to the room that we’re planning on centering this entire thing around and now there’s also a link between you two and Kage?”  The dragon leaned back in his chair and threw his hands in the air. “But other than that this is going perfectly.”

The others grumbled both to themselves and one another while Alkali continued to sit there with the gears turning in his head.  Even though none of them had mentioned aborting the entire mission the fact that the mouse had confronted him and Serathin meant that they had to be extra careful, especially when it came to his part in the plan.  “This doesn’t mean anything… the mouse probably meets so many people in his day that he’s not even going to remember us, right Serathin?” When there was no response the ferret looked over to see the hybrid staring at his phone, his jaw dropping when he looked at what he was working on.  “Are you seriously signing up for a player’s club card!?”

“It’s a good deal,” Serathin replied as he takes his eyes off the phone.  “Plus it would look suspicious if I didn’t take him up on his offer, I mean who would pass up that much free play?  But in any case I think the bigger question is the little tidbit that I heard you and Miko talking about, you know, the one where you’re currently under investigation?”

Both Xander and Zen immediately turned to Alkali, who looked away slightly from the others.  When the three glanced over at Draggor they saw that he was also looking down at the table. “Care to air out what that’s all about?” Zen asked.  “I was told that we’re just all here to make ourselves a lot of money, but it feels like that isn’t the case with you two.”

There was a long silence between the group, punctuated only by the sound of a car engine roaring by from their driver testing out his vehicle.  No one seemed to want to speak, the accusation hanging over the party like the heat that permeated the air. Both Serathin and Xander quietly got up and went over to where they had been keeping their snacks while the silence drew on and Zen continued to sit with his arms crossed while waiting for either ferret or demon to respond.  Finally when the other two got back with drinks did Alkali being to break the silence, only to be interrupted by Draggor.

“A few years back I noticed a glitch in the system that Alkali’s firm used in order to process trades,” Draggor said.  “While I won’t go into the specifics, it basically allowed something like an anonymous trade to go through with no trader’s name attached to it, and with the glitch it would still be processed but not put on any list.  We called it ghost trading and for a long time we were able to get away with using Alkali’s knowledge of the market and upcoming events to take advantage. As long as we didn’t go over any of the red flags the IRS put into place we would be fine, just put in the bids and let them make their money, and any that didn’t we could just delete and no one would be the wiser.”

“Unfortunately we didn’t account for three of our companies we invested in to go completely bankrupt at once,” Alkali continued on.  “We shorted the stock because I heard that they were going to post some poor revenue reports, and by the time I heard it was a joint chapter eleven filing it was too late.  We made so much money so quickly that by the time Draggor was able to delete the stock purchase it had already been flagged.”

“When did all this happen?” Xander asked in concern.

“Two weeks ago,” Alkali stated.  “While Draggor managed to wipe most of the evidence there’s still a copy of the flags on that data report, and if it gets released they’re going to see the holes in the data and know that we had something to do with it.”

“That’s why you want to steal it without anyone knowing that we did so,” Serathin replied with a smirk.  “If there’s no trail in the data then it would be like nothing happened and it was some sort of glitch in the flagging system, but if someone steals the data then all bets are off.  It’s a clever way to get yourself out the weeds, but I’m not here to bail you out, I’m here to make a lot of money.”

Zen nodded and stood up.  “I also would like to make a lot of money,” the fox said as he looked at the hybrid.  “Maybe I’ll see if I can’t get in on that free play deal of yours, see if I don’t have better luck at the casino.”

“Guys, hold on,” Alkali said, holding up his hands.  “I never said that we’re not going to make a lot of money on this.  Our idea is still solid and Draggor has found a way to make it so we can use the data that we get in order to make us all rich without getting flagged by anyone.  The plan is still there, we just have another reason to go in there is all.”

Both Serathin and Zen stood there for a while, the two looking at one another without saying anything before the hybrid looked at Alkali with his eyes narrowed.  “Let’s say that we do pull this off,” Serathin asked. “But we only have ten minutes to do what we need to do before we have to put the data back, and that’s enough time to either get the futures report or to delete the insider trading you two did.  Are you going to save your skins or get us paid?”

“We’ll get you paid of course,” Draggor quickly replied.  “If push comes to shove we can get out of here with all the money that we earned, maybe find a nice island to buy or something.  I’m hoping that we can do both, though, as it would be nice not to be wanted criminals.”

While both fox and hybrid seemed to be somewhat satisfied with the response the atmosphere was still tense as the others got to work.  Zen and Serathin moved over to the pulley system that he had created in order to simulate the inside of the hotel he was working on. That left Draggor, Xander, and Alkali around the table and though they tried to talk about the plan none of them really had anything to say.

“So… anyway…” Xander said as he looked back to see if the other two were out of earshot before looking back.  “I can understand leaving those two in the dark about this, but why did you decide not to tell me? Not just the fact that you’re in trouble either, but about the trading and everything else.”

Alkali sighed and leaned forward as Draggor excused himself to make a drink of his own so that ferret and dragon could talk more privately.   “I didn’t want to bother you while you were on tour,” the ferret explained. “Plus I thought that if you knew where the extra money came from you might not want to use it or tell me to stop.  I was just thinking about what was best for all of us.”

“Well you’re right in that I don’t want to have to visit you in jail,” Xander replied.  “And while I think we still need to have a few words about this, let’s make sure that doesn’t happen first.  My question is were you telling the truth when you said that if you had to make the choice that you would take the money and run, or would you clear your name so you wouldn’t be a criminal?”

Meanwhile Zen held onto one of the pulley ropes as Serathin hung upside down, working on wiring in one of the panel boxes that was secured to one of the walls.  “It’s not like I don’t feel for the guys,” the sabrewolf said, his words slightly garbled as he held one of the tools in his mouth. “But I don’t do things for free here and this is a lot of work just to make sure a friend doesn’t go to jail.”

“Agreed,” Zen replied.  “What I don’t get is why you’re not more worried that this Miko character made you while in the casino.  What if he decides to run a background check on you?”

“Please,” Serathin scoffed, nearly dropping the tool before he spit it into his hands.  “Do you think I would have went a hundred feet around that casino before the big night if I had any warrants on me?  One of the first things you have to do when you’re an infiltration expert is keep your nose clean so you can scout places without the police watching you, I mean you probably don’t have anything on you, either, since you work legitimate jobs.”

“At least nowhere that has a computer system to share that info,” Zen replied with a chuckle before his face grew serious once again.  “So since you’re going to be the one in the vault with the black box, what’s stopping you from taking the data for yourself? Draggor’s not going to be there, can’t you just steal the data and put it on a flash drive or something?”

Serathin shook his head, which caused him to swing back and forth slightly and lose focus on what he was working on.  “Data’s encrypted,” the sabrewolf replied. “Even if I did copy it I would need a hacker or something like that in order to get it into a usable form, and even if I could get it done before the data becomes useless I have no way to make the trades.  We need Draggor to do all of that stuff for us.”

“Shame,” Zen replied simply.  “Looks like our money is in their hands after all.”

“It appears so,” Serathin stated.  “Alright, you can let me down now, I think I’m ready.”

As Zen lowered the suspended hybrid to the floor a shadow that had been standing there retreated back, Draggor silently making his way around the staging area where they couldn’t see him…

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Night fell on the city once more and with it came up the lights of the various casinos and other places of entertainment within it, one in particularly holding the pensive mouse who sat in his office.  Miko didn’t even turn his chair around when he heard the door open, his head of security striding through the office to the desk where he put down the laptop that he had been holding. “So the SEC denied your request to look at the data on the black box,” Nbowa informed his boss while opening the laptop.  “But we were able to get the information on the Alkali that you met inside of the hall.”

Miko turned around and looked at the screen as it showed the picture of the ferret as well as quite a bit of information including his trader number.  “Mr. Bismuth…” Miko said as he scrolled through the profile. “Investigated for insider trading and wire fraud along with the rest of his company, so it appears that what he said about that was true.  Two weeks ago IRS flagged a massive amount of earnings from stocks that just suddenly vanished, currently ongoing. Also says that they interviewed him and found nothing suspicious in his ledger, which is why he’s here right now… what about the other one?”

“Not much on that one,” Nbowa responded as he leaned over and pushed a button that caused the screen to flash to a new profile with the draconic sabrewolf’s face on it.  “His name does appear to be Arkham Sabrewolf and he is an international security consultant. Been to a lot of places, but no criminal record anywhere on file.”

“So he’s a thief,” Miko replied, causing the lion to get a surprised look on his face that caused the mouse to chuckle.  “He may as well put it on his resume, that and the fact that he was pretending to help the cockroach with his little party.  It appears there is some sort of plot afoot… and I don’t like it.”

“I could step up security if you want,” Nbowa quickly responded.  “Get their faces out there and see if they try something funny. We can make sure that they don’t get within a hundred yards of this casino without someone spotting them.”

Miko paused for a moment as he weighed his options, flicking the screen back to the picture of the ferret.  “We could certainly prevent whatever they’re attempting to do, maybe even see if we can’t get something to stick as far as criminal charges are concerned,”  the mouse scratched his chin as he continued to contemplate. “But… that’s all that’s going to happen. Most likely they’d be scared off and they’d scamper back to whatever hole they crawled out of to hide and nothing would happen to them… or…”

“Sir, you’re not seriously considering what I think you’re considering,” Nbowa asked, being taken aback when the growing smile on the mouse’s face confirmed what he was thinking.  “You’re going to put your casino at risk in order to catch someone in the act? As your chief of security I can’t advise you doing something so reckless.”

“What, don’t think you’re up to the challenge?” Miko replied with a chuckle as he went back to Serathin’s file.  “This one is bold enough to sign up for a player’s card in the casino he’s about to rob, I want to make sure to catch him in the act… it would be interesting to see what shakes out of that tree.”  He slides the computer around to Nbowa after switching it once more. “As for that one, if we can actually connect him to whatever he’s trying to do I’m sure that not only will the SEE conference happen here from now, on but I’ll get a sizable bonus as their way of saying thanks.”

“That’s some risky business there, boss,” Nbowa said with a sigh.  “But if you’re willing to put up the risk I’ll make sure that it gets done.  Still, you have to admit that if you fail at catching these guys it’s going to look very, very bad.”

Miko turned to face the window once more, looking out over the city.  “What you fail to recognize is that this is my turf, my rules, MY casino,” the mouse said with a deathly serious look on his face.  “And in my casino the mouse ALWAYS wins.”

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Back in the desert everyone that the group could gather that was part of tomorrow’s plans were there, save for Kage who wanted to continue to minimize exposure since he was the face of the party, including Pandez, Nizzbit, and others.  Though they had nothing to celebrate for quite yet they were gathered together with drinks and food in order to make sure that everyone was ready for what they were about to do. There was a nervous energy in the air as those with more active roles in the plan talked shop while the others maintained idle conversation to see the state of things.  Once they were done here they would pack up shop and remove any trace of their existence from the hangar.

“So you have everything you need for tomorrow?” Xander asked Pandez.  “I know this is kind of short notice for you and you’re going to be putting yourself out there with this.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about little old me,” Pandez replied with a wave of his hand.  “It’s not like we haven’t done this kind of thing before, and this time I have a lot more motivation behind it.  Everything is right on schedule and ready for you to come in.”

“Hey guys!” Zen said suddenly, alerting the two to his presence as well as that of a husky that he was dragging with him.  “I know we were talking about looking for someone that could help us with spotting and I happened to have a friend that was looking for work.  I would like you all to meet Citrine.”

“It’s a pleasure,” Citrine said as he held his hand out between the two, both Pandez and Xander looking at one another before reaching and shaking his hand respectively.  “Zen ringed me up and asked if I was in the the area, since I wasn’t doing anything tomorrow I wanted to pitch in!”

“Right…” Pandez said as he continued to stare at the icy blue eyes of the husky, he and the dragon glancing at one another as Citrine continued to stare straight ahead.  “Glad to have you on board, I guess?”

“Yeah…” Xander said as he leaned in closer, the canine not responding to it.  “So, what makes you qualified as a look-out?”

“I’m very inconspicuous,” Citrine stated.  “People tend not to look in my direction, so I can pretty much stand where I want and can relay information to you without drawing attention.  Just put me where you need me and I’ll be ready to go!”

“Yes, I see… I mean…” Xander glanced over at Zen, the vulpine grinning at them.  “Hey Zen, could I talk to you for a second over there?”

Zen nodded and the two walked to another part of the hangar, leaving Pandez with Citrine.  Once Xander believed he was sufficiently far enough away to be out of earshot he looked at the fox with a frown on his face.  “Are you serious right now?” he asked, crossing his arms. “Like, is this real life we’re experiencing at the moment?”

“What?” Zen asked as he gestured towards the husky.  “You said you needed someone to look over the back door of the casino and maybe run interference, he can do both!  Plus he’s the best spotter I could get on short notice.”

“He’s BLIND!” Xander nearly shouted, catching himself and hushing his voice as best he could as he gestured over to where the husky and panda stood.  Both Zen and Xander watched as Pandez waved his hand in front of the canine’s face, confirming what had been the dragon’s suspicion all along. “What the hell are we going to do with a blind lookout?”

“I’ve actually got great hearing!” Citrine called out, turning his head towards them and waving.  “That’s why people usually hire me, along with the whole disability thing. Plus they can park the getaway car closer to whatever building they happen to be robbing from.”

“Oh my god,” Xander said as he put his hands to his muzzle and dragged them down in exasperation, sighing loudly before he looked at Zen again.  “...what are his rates?”

Meanwhile on the other side of the hangar Serathin just got done briefing the huscoons to make sure they got their part of the job down pat, sitting on the edge of the makeshift platform that had been built.  As the hybrids started to scatter the sabrewolf noticed Alkali walking up to him with two drinks in his hands. “Think they’re ready?” he asked as he handed one to Serathin.”

“Ready as any of us,” Serathin replied as he took a drink.  “Is it my turn for the pep talk?”

“Not quite…” Alkali stated.  “I need to know that I can count on you for your part, that you and Draggor are going to be working together to get what we need.  As far as I can tell Zen is ready to cover your backs and Xander is ready to provide the cover, but I want to know given your nature that we’re not going to come out of this with daggers in our backs.”

Serathin looked slightly surprised at the accusation, then looked down at the floor several stories below their feet.  “I would like to think that all personal feelings aside you would still regard me as a professional,” Serathin stated simply.  “It would be rather poor form to leave colleagues in the dust, it’s a very quick way to stop others from working with you again.  While I like to lone wolf it I do have need for others like yourself, plus betrayal isn’t exactly my thing.”

“Are you sure?” the ferret asked, putting a number of pictures into the hands of the sabrewolf.  “After our little conversation we had Draggor check in on you to make sure that you were still on the level and we saw several calls made to what I assume was one of your contacts after we all promised no outside contact while this job is taking place.  We also definitely would have liked to know about clandestine meetings with lionesses in shady alleys.”

The frown that had been on the hybrid’s face deepened and let the pictures of him meeting with someone else fall down the wall to the floor.  “I… don’t know what to say,” Serathin stated as he stood up, taking off the harness he had been wearing while he trained. “The day before a job and you’re accusing me of double-dealing?”

“If the shoe fits,” Alkali responded angrily.  “You going to respond or not?”

There was a moment of pause before Serathin finally responded.  “Sure…” he said before darting forward and getting the belt of the harness around the ferret’s waist, catching Alkali by surprise as the clasp was snapped expertly into place.  “Here it is.”

Before Alkali could do anything Serathin took a step back and kicked the ferret square in the chest, causing him to scream as he fell several stories down.  Alkali immediately squeezed his eyes shut as he plummeted to his death, screaming the entire way down as he put his hands in front of his face. The loud shouting continued for quite a few seconds before the ferret realized that he was neither smashed on the concrete floor nor dead.  When he slowly opened his eyes he found himself dangling several inches over it, swaying back and forth as he looked up to see the entire hangar staring at the sudden disruption.

“The reason that you’re not dead right now is because of the equipment that I got from that contact you so rudely thought was someone I was scheming with,” Serathin instructed Alkali as he looked down from his perch.  “So you can thank Dr. Mittens for you not being splattered on the floor. I’d get an instruction booklet on all of this hardware if I were you, too, since I’m out.”

There was an audible gasp from everyone in the hangar as the draconic sabrewolf glided down with his wings to the door and walked outside while Xander, Draggor, and Zen moved to help get Alkali from swinging back and forth.  “So… I take it that your meeting did not go well,” Draggor said while Zen moved to the auto-brake on the rappel line to get the ferret back on his feet. “At least you know that he’s on the level.”

“By trying to kill me…” Alkali grumbled as he finally got freed.

“Hey guys,” the group heard Nizzbit say as the tiger rushed over to them.  “Did I just hear that the guy responsible for bypassing the physical security just quit?”

“Yes, yes you did,” Zen stated, the others glaring at him as he shrugged his shoulders.  “What? Did he not just quit?”

“Well that’s a big problem,” the tiger stated.  “This whole thing is popping off in fourteen hours and we just lost a fifth of the team.  Do we even have time to find someone else?”

The others just shook their heads and it was clear from the level of audible conversation that the sudden fracture of the core team has caused the others to grow anxious.  Some discussed aborting the plan while others wondered if they could fill in the hole left by the sabrewolf in time. As things began to unravel the blue dragon announced for everyone to just sit tight, then turned to the others after he had gotten them calmed down.

“Alright then,” Xander said as he looked out where he could see the hybrid talking to Bad Habit Rabbit.  “You guys stay here, I’m going to see if I can have a talk and maybe get this whole plan back on the rails before we crash into the station.”

The others nodded and Xander quickly ran into the cool desert air, shouting for both lapine and hybrid to stop what they were doing before they got into the car.  The dragon motioned for Serathin to follow him away from the car onto the cracked pavement that surrounded the hangar bays. At first Xander stopped him to talk just outside but then remembered that Citrine was still there, so they opted to continue to walk.  Finally once they had sand under their feet instead of concrete did the dragon finally believe they were able to talk.

“Let me guess,” Serathin said with a huff.  “You’re here to try and convince me not to bail on this whole thing right now?”

“You are correct,” Xander replied.  “I know where you’re coming from, but you have to understand where Draggor and Alkali are at too.  If they don’t pull this off not only will they be criminals once they release that report, but they won’t have the money to flee the country and will have to hide for the rest of their lives.  You got to understand the weight of that responsibility they’re under and the paranoia that they’re feeling, especially after you do something like sign up for player card benefits.”

The wind shifted and with it the look on the sabrewolf’s face as he continued to keep his arms crossed, anger replaced with dismay.  “I still don’t appreciate being accused,” he said as he kicked a rock, only to have it be one that was partially buried and not move.  “Ow…”

“I’m sure the ferret could have probably worded what he said a bit better,” Xander said with a chuckle as he tried to keep the mood light.  “But you know how he is, has to be in charge and running the show. You made your point by plunging him off a four-story platform, I don’t think that he’s going to question you again… mostly because he’s worried that you’re going to kill him.”

“I may have… overreacted slightly,” Serathin replied as he looked down at the floor.  “But I may as well leave, no one in there is going to trust me to do my job now that I pushed one of our teammates off of a platform.  It kind of shakes the confidence of the group.”

“Look, I’m sure the rest of us will take you back in,” Xander said as he put an arm around the sabrewolf.  “We know that you wouldn’t actually do anything to us, and next time one of us has to accuse you of something I’ll let it be me.”  Serathin’s eyes narrowed at him as the dragon chuckled, then looked away back towards the hanger. “Anyway… I have an idea to get things back to the status quo, we just need to talk to Alkali first…”

A few minutes later Xander and Alkali both got back up on the platform that the ferret had been previously pushed off of, Alkali letting out a bellow to get everyone’s attention to immediately be on him.  “Right then,” Alkali said in his loud voice that echoed throughout the entire hangar. “So thank you everyone for participating in our last little test, we greatly appreciate your commitment to this heist.”

The others in the room looked around in confusion as Xander took the helm.  “We wanted to be sure that we had to you all on board and could face the potential pressure of a stressful situation,” the dragon announced to everyone.  “Since none of you left or voiced your want to quit, we consider everyone here completely on board. We’ve got to clean up now so make sure that you get yourselves a good night’s sleep because tomorrow is the big day, no more rehearsals!”

Though it was clear there was a lot of confusion in those that were gathered it appeared that Xander’s explanation took hold, the anxiety that had been in the air dissipating as people began to filter out of the hangar.  Once everyone had mostly vacated the area Xander and Alkali climbed back down to the floor where the others were waiting for them. “It appears that we avoided yet another potential situation,” Draggor spoke up. “You think they actually bought it?”

“I think we have to thank our bard here for keeping the whole thing together in the final hour,” Alkali replied.  “Now I know tensions are probably still a bit high, but I know that we’re all professionals here and ready to get the job done.”  The ferret looked at Serathin and gave him a wink, the hybrid giving him a nod back. “Now if you guys could help the huscoons get this place broken down, Draggor and I have to get back to the hotel to set up… hopefully there isn’t a mouse sitting there waiting for us.”