Chapter 9:

The buzz of the auditorium was electric as people continued to file into the convention center, which had been completely converted from the vendor area of the SEC to a concert hall.  People from both the convention and the general public were filing in, everyone excited to enjoy the two performers. With so many people heading to the chairs and bleachers of the convention hall the casino had been nearly emptied, though there were still those that prefered gambling over music stayed to spend their money and listen to the music being pumped into the hall.  Deeper in the building those that were setting up for the after party continued to work, but had brought in a television so they could also watch the concert while they remained behind to set things up.

“How are we all doing tonight!?” Pepper announced, the growing crowd of people cheering back as he took the front of the stage while Fox took up his position behind the keyboard.  “It’s great to see a packed house out there tonight, and we want to really thank the Golden Cheese Casino for letting us play not only to the convention, but all you lovely furs out there as well!  Now let’s get started!”

The entire area vibrated with both sound and excitement as the concert began, though one of those closest to it couldn’t hear a thing.  Serathin adjusted the ear plugs he wore as he shifted his body to leave as much of the floor his fake speaker was on exposed. As everything vibrated around him he pulled out a small hand saw and pressed the pointed blade against the bottom, cutting its way not only through the thin particle board but the wood of the stage as well.  Though the machine was quite noisy his proximity to the actual woofers made it impossible to distinguish, and by the time the first song was over the sabrewolf had already cut his way through the stage.

Serathin frowned as he hopped down and looked at the area around him while he put the stage back together as best he could.  While the original plan had been for him to drill down from this point into the vault area itself from there he was no longer above it, instead he had to make his way underneath the stage in order to get back to the casino itself.  From there he made his way to one of the fortunate aspects of his location, the shared elevator shafts between the casino and the convention center. He waited for the next song to start before he took his electric screwdriver and removed the cover of the hatch, using a metallic clamp to secure it back into place so no one would stumble upon it.

“So far so good,” the sabrewolf said to himself as he pocketed the screws before taking a flashlight and clicking it on.  With no longer being out in the open he took a second to look down at his watch and see what the time was, seeing that the concert still had about two hours and forty-five minutes left to go.  “Xander should have gotten my gear into the vent shaft by now…”

Serathin climbed his way from beam to beam inside the elevator, looking up at the elevator car that was held above him.  With the main hall and Uncle Kage’s party being right above the shaft that he was crawling through the vent systems were interconnected with one another.  Thanks to a blueprint secured by Nizzbit he knew which shaft was going to have his stuff and hopped to the wall where the cover was and worked to dislodge it from the wall.  Though it was slow going he managed to pop off the metal grate and clipped it with a carabiner, then slowly hung it from the beam so that he could put it back on later.

When the hybrid looked inside he saw something that caused him to pause; instead of one black mylar bag hanging from the rope there were two, one of them with a note pinned on it.  “What the heck…” he said as he poked his head up into the shaft and shined his light up there, half expecting to see the blue dragon looking back down at him. “This certainly doesn’t bode well.”

Serathin grabbed both packs and secured them to his belt, then quickly spot welded the grate back onto the metal wall before descending back down through the shaft to the bottom.  As he did he passed by the metal elevator door that led to the security hallway, and though the vault sat tantalizingly on the other side he knew that it wasn’t even close to the time to pop it open.  Instead he opened the bag with the note in it, finding a mask and uniform in it as well as a few other pieces of gear. After holding up a small black USB drive he looked down at the note to finally read it.

After reading the hastily scrawled note on what looked like a napkin twice he sighed and put his head against the metal wall of the elevator shaft.  “I guess they just couldn’t make this easy,” he said as he looked into the first bag and saw the actual gear that he had requested in it. “Never thought that I would need to break into this thing twice.  What on earth is going on up there?”

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A few hours earlier Alkali looked out of the hotel room that he had Draggor book for them, the demon busy setting up the last of his computers once again as the ferret watched the growing crowd forming at the convention center.  “Looks like Fox and Pepper are going to have quite the turnout,” Alkali said as he watched all the excited people filing into the atrium. “That’s good for us, how is the set-up going?”

“I think I’m almost done here,” Draggor replied.  “Looks like Miko is definitely on to us after he collapsed my connection from the room, it was almost sad watching them fumble around before they found me.  Of course for now we’re completely blind, I don’t have any eyes on anything right now and won’t until we re-establish communications with their computer system.”

“Well our inside man said that he was getting ready to go there,” Alkali replied as he looked at his watch.  “I can’t believe we’re doing this early, but with only an hour and a half before the concert starts we need to get the new plan into position.  Shame though, really wanted to get a piece of that cake, myself.”

“Did someone say cake?”  Diz said as he walked inside the hotel room with a very bulky electronic device.  “I could go for a slice, myself.”

“Maybe later,” Alkali stated, going over and helping the canine get the giant metal box onto the table.  “So do you think you can get the masks we need in order to pull this off?”

“It’s going to be close since the latex still needs time to cure,” Diz explained while opening a laptop and plugging it into the device, the three-dimensional printer whirring to life as power was fed to it.  “Given the faces you showed me I already have a comprehensive model ready to go, which one do you want me to do first?”

“This one,” Alkali said, pulling out his phone to show the dragon security guard that had been following him earlier.  “We need to get it to our dragon waiter who will then get it to our sabrewolf burglar before he goes for his gear, which is in… an hour from now.”

Diz nodded and brought up the dragon model onto his computer and the nozzles inside the box came to life, spraying a shiny substance onto a plastic mannequin head that looked exactly like Serathin.  While that was happening Alkali went back to where the demon was still feverishly typing, though his eyes were more focused on the blank screens that simply said there was no feed. If they couldn’t get those cameras back online they were flying blind, and with all the changes they were making at the last second that was nearly impossible.  But it was out of their hands, all they could do was wait for the others and hope they succeeded.

Meanwhile in the security room Miko watched the screens eagerly while Nbowa sat at his own terminal and told the others where to look while his own screen ran facial recognition.  With no sign of the ferret or the sabrewolf the only thing they could do was keep looking, trying to find where they were going to strike next. The mouse was dead set on trying to find something, anything that they can use to bring in the SEC, but so far it appeared that everything was quiet.  The only other place that showed increased activity was the main hall, but with Uncle Kage and his mob of people still setting up all they could do was monitor the chaos with cameras and several security that was there.

As Miko told them to focus back on the craps table there was a knock on the door, all the personnel inside turning to the lion as he gave a shrug before going to it.  When he opened it he had to suddenly move aside as a cart was wheeled in with a large chocolate sheet cake on it filled with candles. “Happy birthday to you, Nbowa!” Pandez said as he continued wheel it into the middle of the room, several other members of the food and beverage staff filed in.  “We know it’s a week early, but with Uncle Kage ordering several cakes for his own party we decided to throw one more on the invoice for the king of the security office!”

“Guys, you shouldn’t have!” the lion replied happily before glancing over to Miko and seeing the death stare he was receiving, immediately straightening up.  “I mean, you shouldn’t have brought this cake in here, we’re all very busy and can’t be distracted by such things.” As Nbowa looked over and saw that though the mouse still had his arms crossed, a small grin appeared on his muzzle.  “Although… since it’s already here I don’t suppose we could all just get a small piece before sending it back?”

For a few seconds all eyes were on Miko, including Pandez as he held the knife just over the frosting of the cake.  “I guess…” the mouse said with a sigh and roll of his eyes. “Just one piece and then you’re getting all of this out of here immediately!”

There was a cheer from the group as the rest of the staff in the food service department that had come along started to help distribute pieces.  One of those was Xander, the blue dragon taking a couple of pieces as Pandez sliced them before maneuvering his way to the terminal that was marked for Nbowa.  With everyone focused on the cake and its consumption Xander managed to kneel down for a few seconds and slide his hand behind the computer tower, clicking the small chip that Draggor had managed to sneak to him through the panda into one of the USB drives.  When he was sure that it was secure the dragon gave a little motion to make it look like he had tripped before popping back up.

Though there were a few passing glances Xander breathed an internal sigh of relief and made his way out of the security office once most of the cake had been distributed.  The second that he was out of earshot he got on his phone and told the others that the bug had been planted. The demon on the other side of the line confirmed that they were receiving data and to go back to the party since they had another package he was going to have to smuggle in.  Xander quickly closed the phone and went back to the main hall once more to keep up his cover and to wait for his next instruction.

Back at the hotel room Draggor breathed a sigh of relief as he clicked through the various feeds that he had just gotten access to.  “So as long as the head of security is logged in I should have access to their servers again,” the demon explained. “This is even better than our last set-up, I should be able to access files and set up a dummy account so that we can intercept communications and manipulate data from their own security personnel.  I kind of wish we had just done this for our first plan instead of using the cake as a distraction for when Serathin would sneak through the security hallway.”

“Thought about it but didn’t think it was worth the risk at the time,” Alkali replied as he got into his suit.

“You just didn’t want to risk your dragon boyfriend,” Draggor accused, the ferret merely shrugging in reply before going over to Diz.

“How’s the mask coming along?” Alkali asked, watching as the sprayers put fine details on the edges of the scales of the very life-like mask.

“The quick-cure is acting very well this time,” Diz replied, showing Alkali the progres screen on his laptop.  “It’s not going to be the longest lasting creation of mine, but I think that given what you need it for you should be fine.  Only problem is that your guy is going to look like him, but unless he’s a mimic he won’t sound like him.”

“One problem at a time,” Alkali said as he patted Diz on the shoulder before texting Nizzbit on his phone on where he was, shortly getting a reply that he’s coming up at that moment.  The ferret waited for the tiger at the door and the second he heard a knock he whipped it open and brought him inside. The feline’s tail narrowly missed being caught in the door as Nizzbit showed him the duffel bag full of new stuff that he had managed to get at the last moment, Alkali nodding with an impressed look on his face before putting it next to the mask printer.

Even though everyone was anxious to move onto the next phase of the plan they still had to wait for their final prop to be ready to go.  As they sat in the small room Draggor suddenly announced that Miko was getting guards ready to go back into the casino after they were done handling the crowd for the beginning of the concert, no doubt to try and keep flushing out Serathin or Alkali.  With their camera controls operational again the demon also announced that their plants inside of the casino were ready to go. Though they kept text and calls to one another to a minimum they had informed everyone inside of the augmented plan, all of them nodding slightly after they had checked their phones before resuming their gambling.

Finally with only fifteen minutes left before the concert started Alkali heard Diz announce that the mask should be finished and carefully removed it before putting it into the duffle bag with everything else.  Once that was finished Alkali took the bag and walked with it to the Golden Cheese casino. Though he knew he was going to be instantly spotted there was no one else that he could call up in order to move the merchandise, everyone was either in their respective positions already or working to get something else done.  Almost immediately the ferret felt eyes on him and though he tried not to turn his head he looked over his shoulder to see a rhino in a tight suit on his tail immediately.

Alkali attempted to remain nonchalant as he walked from the slots to the tables, keeping his pace steady and his bag next to his side.  When he got to the blackjack table he saw one of the huscoons get up and pass by him, the ferret handing off the bag to the hybrid before continuing to move on.  As the one he thought might be Erik moved over to another bank of tables he crossed paths with another huscoon, this one maybe Ian as they exchanged the bag. While Alkali couldn’t be sure if any of the huscoons were being followed by this point even he was having trouble keeping track of where the bag was, especially when they somehow introduced another duffle into the mix that all five of them were passing from one to another.

With the bag secured Alkali made his way up to the main hall where the party was still being prepared, seeing that he still had a tail on him.  That was fine with him, though, especially when he got to the main hall to see that the doors were once more shut and there was a guard posted at the only door that was open.  With a few seconds he straightened his trader’s jacket and went up to the bouncer, only to be immediately denied with a hand on his chest. “Oh, I’m a friend of Uncle Kage’s.” The ferret said as he tried to push past only to once more be denied.

“No one is allowed into the party until the concert is over,” the stern-faced cougar said as he stood in front of the ferret and crossed his muscular arms.  “Orders of Miko Maus. You don’t have a pass you don’t get in.”

“Oh come on, man,” Alkali said, seeing one of the other security guards out of the corner of his eye.  “Can’t you just go in and ask Kage? The cockroach and I clicked, man, we’re practically family.”

The feline shook his head, then pushed him aside to allow a lithe, green-feathered gryphon through after he showed an identification badge with the name Malwave on it.  Once the performer for the party passed the cougar once more took up his position in front of him. Alkali wasn’t sure what to do at this point, the only thing he was there was to distract the guard so that one of the huscoon squad could sneak in with the bag, but as he tried to reason with the man to let him in he didn’t see any of them.  Finally it was clear that his welcome was being worn out as the one that had been tailing him began to approach and the ferret finally gave up and went over to one of the stairwells to exit.

At the same time on the other side of the doors Xander watched as the green gryphon walked in, or more importantly at the bag that he was carrying.  It was the one that the huscoons had given him a heads-up they had switched, letting him know to grab it as soon as he could before the performer opened it.  Luckily he wasn’t the only one running interference as the dragon watched Uncle Kage approach and asked Malwave how he was doing. As the insect engaged in small talk Xander skillfully approached from the other side and grabbed the duffel, moving his way back over to the employee entrance where he could hide.

“Oh, um, one sec…” the dragon heard the gryphon say just as he turned the corner, peeking around to see Malwave still regarding Kage.  “Did you see where my bag went? It has all my stuff in it for the party tonight.”

“Bag?” Uncle Kage replied, looking around himself as he swirled the wine in his glass.  “I don’t think I saw you come in with a bag, my dear boy. Are you sure you didn’t accidentally misplace it somewhere?  Did you do something or get something before you came up here?”

The gryphon tapped his beak as he looked down, then snapped his fingers.  “I got a couple glasses of the free water from the refreshment stand!” he said in an epiphany.  “I thought I had only set it down for a second… I’ll be right back! Hopefully no one took it to the lost and found yet...”

Xander breathed a sigh of relief and texted Alkali that he has the replacement gear for Serathin, Alkali sending a slightly garbled one back sarcastically replying thanks for the heads-up.  Of course there was also the matter of writing the note so that the sabrewolf knew what was actually happening, but when he looked around he couldn’t find any paper or anything to write it with.  He knew that every second counted and finally found a paper napkin, a few pieces of electrical tape, and a piece of chalk that they had used to write on it. Though it wasn’t going to be pretty Xander tried as best he could in order to relay the new plan, scratching in what he thought would be the most important information for him to know.  After smudging twice he finally had something that was usable enough to read before heading back to the vent.

Once he had gotten to the vent that had been intentionally hidden by the decorations he lowered it down alongside the other one, securing it with a rope he had found.  He tried as hard as he could to make sure that it didn’t bump up against the sides, the last thing they needed at this point was a miscommunication. After he had made sure it wouldn’t fall all the way down he got back up and quickly reintegrated himself back into the roll of waiters that were coming in and out of the kitchen.  It appeared that his disappearance hadn’t been unnoticed; however, as he heard a loud, heavily-accented voice shout from behind one of the stove.

“You, dragon!” the wolverine in a head chef jacket shouted as he pointed directly at Xander.  “You were supposed to be in here ten minutes ago to get out the tasting samples for monsieur Kage!  Look at these soups, the cream has congealed and the tomato has already gotten a film on it!”

“Sorry Le Jacque,” Xander replied as he struggled not to roll his eyes.  “I got caught up in conversation, won’t happen again.”

“Conversation?!  CONVERSATION!?!” several of the other servers instinctively seemed to duck their heads as the wolverine banged a pot against the stove burner hard enough to dent both.  “My masterpiece is ruined because you had the chit-chat!? I’ll make sure you can’t converse ever again after I tear out your tongue and serve it to Monsieur Kage as an apology!”

Several of the other chefs quickly jumped in to restrain the wolverine as he grabbed a knife and made a move for the blue dragon who quickly jumped back.  “That’s it, I can’t take this anymore!” Xander replied as he took off his bow-tie and slammed it against the ground. “Don’t bother firing me, I quit! Next time you see me is when I sue you for the threat, Le Jacque!”

“Sue me!?” the wolverine shouted as he continued to struggle against the others holding him back.  “You’re lucky I didn’t fire you in my oven and serve dragon bourguignon! This isn’t the last you’ve seen me, dragon, you’ll rue the day that you crossed paths with the great Le Jacque!”

Xander continued to retain his composure ever after he continued to hear the head chef ranting and raving behind him.  Once he had cleared not only the kitchen but the entire casino he breathed a sigh of relief and informed the others that he was out, then walked over towards the abandoned butcher shop were Zen was to help him out.  He knew he had to be back in the casino later, but for the moment his part was played.

Alkali looked at his watch and saw that there was only a few minutes left until the concert started, but with everything in play now they were ready to at least get to the next part of the plan as he turned to leave the casino.  “Why hello there, Alkali,” a familiar voice said that caused the ferret to cringe inwardly before turning around. “Fancy meeting you here again.”

“Well it is your casino,” Alkali snarked.  “I would imagine that would make the odds pretty good.  You guys are all about odds, right?”

“Of course,” Miko replied, a small grin on his muzzle as he held up a pair of tickets.  “Since I had the fortune of running into you I wanted to invite you to one of the skyboxes in the convention center as my guest.  I realize that I might have been a bit unfair in pressing you so hard about your investigation and thought that this would be my way of apologizing to you.  What do you say?”

“Well I would love to accept, but…” Alkali paused for a moment as he thought of an appropriate response to say that wouldn’t look suspicious.  “I am so tired out from the convention, I thought that I would go and… drink at the bar for the rest of the night.”

There was a moment that the mouse seemed to decide on what he was going to say next before shrugging.  “Well I hear it’s going to be quite the concert,” Miko replied. “Plus the skybox has a bar that you can partake of, I’ll even throw it in free of charge to sweeten the deal.  Now don’t make me feel insulted by not taking these tickets.”

Even though Alkali knew this wasn’t a peace offering, and was likely being used as a means to keep him in one spot so security didn’t have to keep following him around and listen in to anything he does, he gave his best fake smile and plucked the ticket out of the mouse’s hand.  “Why not?” he said as convincingly as he could. “I would love to watch the concert with you, should be a good time.”

“Oh, I will not be joining you in watching,” Miko replied as his smirk grew.  “The other ticket happens to be for your sabertooth friend should he decide to show up.  Or I suppose you could just call him and get him down here so that he doesn’t miss anything.”

“I already told you that he wasn’t my friend,” Alkali replied as sternly as possible without over-selling it.  “It’s pretty clear that you think that I’m part of some sort of conspiracy or something… or maybe you’re trying to set me up for one?”

“I assure you that I’m not setting you up,” Miko replied.

“That sounds like something that someone who’s setting someone else up would say,” Alkali quickly shot back.

It was clear that the mouse was starting to get frustrated as that smile of his grew even wider to cover it up.  “Why don’t you just go and enjoy the concert,” Miko said as he gestured over and brought three familiar security guards over.  “These gentlemen will be more than happy to clear the crowd and escort you to the skybox. Now hurry up, you wouldn’t want to miss the opener… I’m sure we’ll have a chance to talk afterwards at the party you seemed so desperate to get into.”

Though the ferret was not comfortable with the three very muscular men accompanying him as he walked from the casino to the convention center, there was little he could do.  Any denials of such a gift after proving he didn’t have any plans would have looked intensely suspicious, and with every camera in the area looking at him it would have been on tape as well.  Instead he continued to play along until he got to the skybox and gave his ticket to the person that was at the elevator. When he started to go to the upper levels the three dispersed, which was at least one good sign as he went to the room he had been told to go and opened it up.

“Well if I’m going to be kept prisoner…” the ferret said as he looked around, the iguana behind the bar on one side of the room nodding a him as he went up to the large windows that separated him from the rest of the convention center.  “I guess it could be worse.” As the concert began to start he sat down at the bartender and looked at the various bottles on the shelf. “Tequila, straight up.”

“You got it, boss,” the bartender said before putting a rocks glass and poured the clear liquid into it.  “Got anything you could want back here and if you need any food we can order that too. All compliments of Mr. Maus.”

“How generous of him,” the ferret replied as he slammed back the alcohol before putting the empty glass down.  “This place has a bathroom, right? Don’t have to go down and slum it with the common folk?”

“Of course, sir,” the green iguana replied before pointing the way.  “My name is Dryskalr by the way, feel free to let me know if you require anything else.”

Alkali nodded and made his way towards the bathroom, hoping that the mouse wasn’t bold enough to put cameras there, too, as he stepped inside.  Though he didn’t want to spend too long in there so that they thought he was communicating with people. The ferret typed as quickly as he could on his phone and sent the text message to Xander, then popped his head out again and went to the recliner chairs that faced the stage.  As he sat down he saw Fox and Pepper starting to come out to a roar of applause and taking the stage, though all Alkali could focus on was one of the speakers that sat near the back.

Meanwhile back in the tunnel coming from the butcher shop Zen was busy unscrewing panels on the wall and handing them to the dragon behind him when Xander’s phone began to buzz in his pocket.  The two looked at one another, then down at the explosives he was holding, before Xander slowly and carefully set them on the ground. Once they were both sure that they wouldn’t get jostled around the dragon stepped away before he pulled out his phone and looked at it.

“Huh, it’s a text from Alkali,” Xander stated, which caused the fox to stop what he was doing and look at him.

“Is there a problem?” Zen asked, noting the look of confusion on Xander’s face.  “What did he say?”

“Herd up in sklybix,” Xander replied as best he could as he read the words several times.  “Cernt run insurance.” The dragon sighed and shook his head as he looked at his screen. “This is with his autocorrect on… which means he couldn’t use talk to text.”

“You sure?” Zen asked.

“If there’s one thing I know is that unless it’s dire he’s always going to use talk to text in order to send his messages through,” the dragon mused.  “Also he must have been in a huge hurry, give me a second here. Herd up in sklybix… Zen, do you know if the convention center has any skyboxes or something like that?”

“Yeah, I saw them when I was helping Ronnie get down from hanging up the last string of fireworks, why?” before Xander could respond Zen’s eyes lit up and he pointed at him.  “Ah, I get it! He’s saying that he’s in the skybox!”

“And he can’t run interference…” Xander replied as he put his hand to his head.  “Means we’re going to need someone else in order to run across our marked man. I suppose we could get the huscoons in on it, maybe have them start a fight on the casino floor?”

“I… have a better idea,” Zen said as the grin on his face grew even wider.  “I think you’re going to love this one, hopefully we have enough time to put him into place.  You get ready and inform Draggor, I’m going to make the call on this one.”