Chapter Three

Screwdriver was wagging her tail as she crossed the street to the Monbella Building, carrying her LAN Box in her arms. Kendra was right behind her, holding their passes for the expo that was happening in the Monbella. There were other guests and participants entering, too, but Kendra was busy watching Screwdriver as if she was her younger sister: “How often do you go to these events?”

“What, LAN parties? I’ve never been to one.”

“Then how do you know about them?”

“Everybody who builds computers or plays games on them knows about the LAN party era of computer gaming! They’re still possible, but as internet connections became more versatile and convenient, and as more and more data became easily transferrable, these physical gatherings became mostly obsolete. Nowadays, they’re more of a reason to meetup, rather than for the game itself.”

They arrived at the lobby to the Monbella Building and found that the two elevators had been divided into two lines: One for tenants and another for the expo guests. The expo elevator had also been set up as the ticketing booth, so Kendra handed Screwdriver her pass: “I’ll hold onto your computer while you put it on.”

“OK, but be careful! It’s expensive!”

Kendra nodded and grabbed onto the computer, surprised by how heavy it felt: “What did you put in this? I didn’t know a computer this small could be so heavy…”

“You saw what I put in there already! This is the same computer I had opened up last night, you know.”

They showed their passes at the elevator and then took it up to the floor with the expo, where they were quickly met by fifty other guests that were attending. Kendra looked around and frowned: “I thought it would be busier…”

Screwdriver shrugged and smiled, getting in line to register her computer: “Like I said, it’s not as popular anymore. But that’s OK! If anything, it means we’ll have much closer conversations with the people here!”

As they reached the front of the line, they noticed a familiar fox standing beside the person who took the computers to set them up for the display. Screwdriver’s eyes widened as she recognized him: “Markus! What are you doing here? I didn’t know you were into LAN parties, too!”

Markus shook his head, showing Screwdriver his pistol: “Speps and I were hired as security guards. If you look closely, you can see him from here.”

Screwdriver looked around, seeing the other tables of displays and vendors, but couldn’t see him. Kendra looked up at the ceiling and smiled, immediately seeing Speps hanging from the ceiling. He had set up a small web to hide in and was carrying what appeared to be a tranquilizer rifle. Kendra then looked back at Markus: “I thought the landlady would have hired security guards for this, not bounty hunters. Aren’t you overkill for an event like this?”

Markus shrugged: “If it’s a job that pays, and we don’t have to hurt anybody unless they threaten to hurt us first, then it’s a job we’ll do. But no, the landlady didn’t hire us. The landlord did.”

“…what landlord? What happened to the elderly woman that owned the Monbella?”

“She sold it to the bounty hunter that lives in the rooftop loft. She still lives here, though. From what the landlord told me, one of the clauses in the contract requires that the former landlady own her apartment and live there rent-free. She just pays for the utilities.”

“Oh, I see… When did the sale happen?”

Markus thought for a moment, trying to remember the conversation he had with the landlord: “I believe it happened two or three months after the Radioaesthetica Incident. It’s been a while since the sale happened, but neither party went out of their way to publicize it.”

“And I take it the landlord hired bounty hunters because he himself is a bounty hunter?”

“Was. He retired from bounty hunting recently, and he mostly just trains new hunters.”

By now, Screwdriver had already finished registering her computer and was standing beside Kendra: “I’m ready to check out the stands if you are.”

Kendra turned to face Screwdriver: “Sure, we can do that. Markus, we’ll see you and Speps later tonight? We’re free all week long, and the expo closes at 5.”

“Sure, I’ll let Speps know that you’re free so we can hang out.”

“Tell him we’ll be at the Willowgrove nightclub after the expo.”

The first stand they visited was one with a server rack, where the person in charge had also brought out four laptops, each of them small and fairly inexpensive. They also had a controller wired up to them, as well as an ethernet cable going from the laptop to a network switch on the rack: “Welcome! I’m here to show you how you can set up a server to run multiple virtual machines, each of them set up for gaming!”

Screwdriver took a seat in front of one of the laptops: “How does it work?”

“The server is running a specialized program that can run virtual machines, and the two server graphics cards are designed to work as four virtual graphics processing units, meaning that each laptop is connecting as its own virtual user, complete with the hardware it needs to run games! Just start the program that is shown on the desktop, type in the username and password on the sticky note, and you’ll be ready to game!”

Kendra took a seat beside Screwdriver and did the same. The vendor turned around to look at a small monitor he had on the server rack, which showed him metrics on each virtual user that was logged in: “OK, that’s two virtual users set up! As you can see, there’s a few games already installed and set up on the computer. Feel free to test them out and see the server’s performance.”

Kendra picked out a racing game and started it up. Screwdriver saw this and chose it as well so she could play with Kendra: “What’s the hardware running on this?”

“The CPU is an Abrey Dynamics Actuos 3850Z, which has 28 cores and 56 threads running at up to 5.6Ghz. Each virtual machine has access to 6 cores and 12 threads, with the remaining 4 cores being used to manage the operating system and virtual machine management. The server GPU’s are also by Abrey Dynamics, and they’re Vizar 3850 Professionals. Those has 5120 shader cores running at 2.8Ghz, and each virtual machine has access to 2560 of those cores. The operating system uses the integrated graphics of the Actuos, which is 192 cores running at 2Ghz. Useless for gaming, but it means the operating system doesn’t need to mooch off the virtual machines.”

Kendra heard all of this and understood none of this, instead being interested in the racing game: “Screwdriver, are you gonna race with me?”

“Yeah, I’m already in the lobby. But wow, this feels great! I like this setup!”

The vendor smiled and sat back down, showing another guest how to log into the machine: “It’s definitely not the most ideal computer to *bring* to a LAN party, but if you’re the one *hosting* it, it means 4 guests don’t need to bring computers at all, yet will be able to play just like everybody else.”

“How much did this cost to set up?”

“A lot of money. The server without the two Vizars cost 4800 Aster Shells, and each Vizar costs 2000. That’s why we sell these to companies, rather than to consumers. We have an internet café just down the road that rents out access, either 10/hour or 60/day. We also have private workshops for groups, and those are 300/day.”

Kendra and Screwdriver started their race, the two of them watching the timer before the formal race began: “Three… two… one… go!”

Screwdriver pressed down on the controller’s right trigger, watching her car speed along the track. Kendra frowned, pressing the A button and watching as nothing happened: “Screwdriver… They changed the controls.”

“What do you mean? This is Starlight Motorsports 6. They haven’t changed them since the series began about 5 years ago.”

Kendra shook her head: “No, I mean the controls changed since I last played a video game… The A button isn’t to accelerate anymore.”

“…when did you last play a game?”

“The GameSphere.”

“*Which* GameSphere? There’s 5 of them.”

“The… first one?”

“Kendra, the first one came out twenty years ago.”

Kendra thought for a moment and then nodded as she smiled: “Sounds about right. I was a little kid when I last played a video game.”

Screwdriver sighed and put down her controller, slowly getting up and reaching around Kendra so she could help her control it: “OK, the A button isn’t for accelerating anymore. They changed it to the right trigger, the one on the back of the controller. The left stick is for turning, and the left trigger is the brakes. With newer games, you need to brake before you reach the turn, or else you’ll just slide off the track and crash.”

“Alright, I think I got it. Let me try on my own.”

Screwdriver let go and watched as Kendra began to drive her car again. Her handling needed more practice, but it was clear that she was starting to get how to play the game: “Which other games do we have that we can play together?”

“I have hundreds of games, but there’s no real way to share the library. Nowadays, everything is digital, so you’ll need to get yourself a computer and then build up your own library of games.”

“How expensive is that?”

“The computer depends on your budget, and the games vary in price. New ones usually cost 70 Aster Shells, but they can go on sale, too. I’ve seen them go as far down as a single Aster Shell, but the popular games will only go down to 20.”

“OK, I’ll figure out a budget and then get back to you on that.”

A few minutes later, they finished the race and logged off, thanking the vendor for the experience and then getting back up to explore the other stands. They soon found another vendor, who had a bunch of mini computers on display. Screwdriver stopped and stared at the computers, the vendor too busy talking to another guest to notice Screwdriver. But Kendra noticed and watched her: “Something wrong, Screwdriver?”

“No, I’m just remembering my old job… I used to clean up computers just like these, you know. I’d switch out the old hard drives with new, solid-state drives, and then I’d reinstall an operating system and resell them as servers. I still have a few in my condo, you know.”

“Do you miss that job?”

Screwdriver thought for a moment, still looking at the computers, and then she shook her head: “I’m not going back to it, if that’s what you mean. My current job is much more interesting, and it pays better. Besides, what’s better than working with your best friend?”

As this was going on, Speps was continuing to watch the expo from up in the ceiling. He had a walkie-talkie on him, which he used to communicate with Markus and with their new Fixer: “Any changes or leads?”

Markus responded, still sitting by the line to register computers: “Negative, all clear at the entrance. Kendra says we should hang out with her and Screwdriver after the expo. They’ll be at the Willowgrove Nightclub.”

“Bronze Age? Sure, we can hang out there.”

The new Fixer spoke up: “I’m receiving word from Varlow that there’s a suspicious group entering from the parking structure. Four people in robes and masks, all of them armed. Monbella Security’s being dispatched, but be prepared for them to enter the expo.”

Speps loaded his rifle with a tranquilizer dart: “Copy that, rifle’s loaded. Any idea which entrance they might take?”

Markus responded: “Only one elevator leads to the expo right now. The other one has this floor disabled.”

Speps shook his head: “Not that, I mean the stairwell.”

The Fixer replied: “Stairwell has to stay unlocked for safety reasons. Monbella Security’s been good with directing the guests to the elevators, so most of them don’t even know the stairwell exists, let alone know to access it to sneak inside.”

Markus checked to make sure his pistol was loaded: “Any idea what they’re coming here for? Tickets are sold online, so there’s no money exchanging hands here. Maybe they’re after the computers?”

Speps shook his head, keeping his gaze fixed on the stairwell: “No, the expo’s not about powerful computers. We’re not selling tickets in person, but the vendors have their own stuff for sale, don’t they? Perhaps they’re coming after that?”

The Fixer cut them off: “They’re breaking into the elevator and the stairwell. Be prepared for a situation.”

Both Markus and Speps prepared themselves for a fight, waiting for the criminals to appear. The elevator began to move up the building, with Markus standing up and approaching it. There was still a small line of people waiting to register their computers, and so he waved his hand for them to get behind cover: “Get under or behind a booth if you can. If you can see the elevator, you’re in danger.”

Speps pulled out a small, disc shaped speaker and threw it at the floor near the stairwell. There were two booths there with three people in total, and all of them could hear what Speps was saying through the wireless speaker: “This is the security team for the computer expo. Please step away from the stairwell and get to cover. If you can see the stairwell, you are in danger.”

The people got to cover, and then Speps watched as two figures appeared behind the door leading into the stairwell. Thankfully, they wouldn’t have been able to see him high above on the ceiling, and so they opened the door all the way and immediately went inside. Speps fired the first dart, which silently flew through the air and poked into the figure in the back. The figure standing in the front didn’t notice the dart, nor did they notice their partner get struck and knocked out.

Markus watched as the elevator door opened up, two masked and robed figures making their way out of the elevator. He first two shots from his silenced pistol, which was just loud enough for the people behind cover to hear the action, but the rest of the expo was able to drown out the sounds. As quickly as the fighting began, it was already ending, with Markus dragging the two figures into the elevator: “Fox to Fixer, I’m sending two of the infiltrators down on the elevator.”

“Copy that, I’ll let Monbella Security know to pick them up at the parking structure.”

Markus finished dragging them and pressed the B1 button before quickly getting out of the elevator and making his way back to his seat: “All clear, you guys can get out of cover now.”

Speps fired his second dart and watched as the second figure fell unconscious: “Spider to Fixer, the stairwell infiltrators are also down. Give Monbella Security a call and have them…”

He watched as three more figures appeared within the stairwell, only for them to continue going up the building: “…hold on, there’s more people.”

“Say again?”

“Three more infiltrators, headed higher up. Not sure what they’re plan is, to be honest.”

“Copy that, I’ll update Monbella Security. Do *not* pursue them. Our priority is keeping the expo secured.”

“Understood. I’ll keep my rifle loaded and stay up here.”

No other infiltrators entered the expo, and Speps and Markus were able to keep the expo safe. Kendra and Screwdriver, having been in the center of the expo, never even realized that something had happened, and so they continued to enjoy the expo, only finding out what had happened during the nightclub gathering that night.