

Machines

Hamburg in the shadows

Von Alaiya

II – Introductions

It was already dusk, when Pakhet arrived in front of the small house in the centre of Harburg. As it was pretty unwise to go to Harburg by motorcycle – especially at night, when the district was pretty much crawling with gang activity – she had preferred to get there by car.

Her car was an especially flashy Jack Rabbit coloured in canary yellow. While the colour seemed pretty noticeable, who was to expect that somebody, who drove such a flashy car was up for now good? It was one of the reasons she loved the car. Well, technically the car had not to be canary yellow, thanks to the wonders of modern technology – namely chameleon coating. But in the end it was mostly that colour, as long there was no good reason against it.

She parked the car and looked at the house. It was one of many single-family homes of the area and as run down as the twin houses standing next to it. The area in general seemed pretty much in ruin, with even the streets being in a pretty bad state.

“Well, let's do this”, she muttered to herself, when she got out of the car. This was the location Michael had given her and if he was right in his assumption, this would turn out pretty interesting.

After locking the car, that now stood in front of the closed garage of the house, Pakhet went to the front door, right next to the garage. As there was only one bell button, she pressed it and waited.

Sure enough, there were steps inside, but she had to wait for a few seconds, until the door was opened. Two men were standing there, both seemingly not very old. One of them was a human in his twenties, with ashen blond hair and a few scars in his face. The other one was an Asian elf with dark brown hair. He also did not look older than about 20 years old, but with elves: Who knew?

Pakhet raised an eyebrow. “So, you were the idiots, who caused that explosion?” Yes, this was not the nice way to greet somebody, but after all she was only here to see, if Michael's assumption was right.

The young human looked at her and just dragged her into the house, before closing the door. “Not so loud!”

Pakhet almost grinned, but managed to suppress the urge. So it really was them.

“And you are?”, the human asked.

“First of all: Who is in charge here?”, she replied.

It was the elf that gave a sigh. “Herr Schmidt. He is in the kitchen.” He went down the small hallway, they were standing in and seemed to want her to follow. So she went

through the half opened door, through which light fell onto floor outside.

In the room, that obviously was the kitchen, a small group was sitting or standing around the table, most of them looking pretty beaten up.

The group consisted out of two more human man and a seemingly pretty young elf, who stood next to a doorway on the right side of the room.

All three of them looked at her. One of the humans – well, he could as well have been an elf, was most of his head was metal – grunted. “So this is reinforcements?” He was a bit overdressed, considering that he was wearing a tuxedo.

“Who of you is Herr Schmidt?” Pakhet asked, ignoring the question.

The other human stood up. “I guess then, that you are Pakhet.”

She nodded and extended her hand, when the man came over to her. “Yep, that's me.”

Herr Schmidt shook her hand. He had a firm grip, something she could appreciate.

“And you need reinforcements, because somebody blew up a hell lot of explosives, right?”, Pakhet asked and after a moment took one of the chairs for herself to sit down.

Half of the men looked angry about the question (or maybe about the fact, that the explosion happened), the other half seemed rather mortified. Only the young elf leaning against the wall smiled, as if all of this amused him somewhat.

“Well, yes”, Herr Schmidt finally replied. “This was not part of the plan.”

“Alright”, Pakhet replied, ignoring the others. “So what should be done?”

Herr Schmidt sat back down himself. “Right now that is the question.”

The kitchen, while at least being equipped, looked as run-down, as the building did from outside. But at least there was working light and – apparently – running water, which was more than Pakhet would have expected from the building's exterior. Then again something in here smelled very bad, like a broken toilet, that had not been fixed for at least a few weeks. But again nothing she would not have expected from a building in Harburg.

“So, what's your thing?”, the chrome-head asked.

She shot him a gaze. “What do you mean?”

Chrome-head fixated her with two red-glowing cyber-eyes. “How are you going to help here?”

As a reply Pakhet lifted her hands and revealed the pistols integrated into her cyber-arms. “Well, normally my thing is to shoot stuff.”

Chrome-head grimaced (at least with the non-cyber part of his face). “Cyber-arms?”

“Indeed.”

“How did that happen?”

For a moment Pakhet wanted to ask, what he meant. Then she realized that he was probably asking, how she had lost her arms. “It did not happen.”

“You did that voluntarily?” Chrome-head seemed shocked or better disgusted.

“Yes.” She simply replied. “And you? What's your thing?”

He was still grimacing. “Decking. Name's Slap.”

“So, this is role call?”, asked the young human, who had dragged her inside before. The thought seemed to cheer him up a bit. But just before he could introduce himself, the doorbell rang again. “I'll go”, he said quickly.

Not quite a minute later he returned with another young human man.

“Well, good timing”, Pakhet muttered to herself, but loud enough that the others could hear her. “So we don't need to repeat everything.”

“Herr Schmidt?”, the new arrival said when the named once again raise from his chair.

“Baramaus, I think?”, Herr Schmidt said.

"Baramus, yes", the human said and looked around. "I was told, there is some help needed, though I don't know for what."

"We were just doing a role call", the other young human said. He pointed at chrome-head. "That's Slap, our decker. And that's... Err..." He pointed at Pakhet, but already seemed to have forgotten her name.

"Pakhet. Mostly muscle", she just said.

"Well, then", the newcomer said with a small bow. "As I said, my name is Baramus. I am a mage."

"I'm Dacart", the other human said. "Adept and master burglar. And also really good with toxic spirits, as it turns out."

The apparently older elf shot him a disgusted gaze, but did not say anything. He had not sat down, but right now stood inside the doorway next to which the other elf leaned.

Pakhet fixated him. "And you are?"

For a moment the elf hesitated. "Kah Pak. I am a wolf shaman."

Meanwhile Baramus looked at the young elf. "That leaves you, I believe. You and the people in the other room." With his thumb he pointed at the doorway Kah Pak was standing in.

The light in the room behind was on as well. Pakhet, too, had noticed the two people inside, but had not minded them, as one of them seemed to be out cold, while the other apparently was a doctor.

"They call me Murphy", the young elf said. "But don't mind me. I am only the security. I was hired to keep the safe house... Well, save." He pointed at the doorway. "The two in there are Hazel and Doctor Heidenstein."

Baramus nodded and for a moment there was silence. Pakhet looked at Herr Schmidt, but the man also did not seem inclined to say anything.

"So", she started, when her patience ended, "what are we here for? And god damn it, how did you manage to blow up that stuff?"

It was now Herr Schmidt, who grimaced. But though once again after a short pause, he started to explain: "Well, they" – he gesticulated at some of the other runners – "where actually hired to steal a small amount of explosives for me. As a few days ago a larger amount of explosives has been stolen by a go gang, the idea was to steal a small amount from them and make then sure, that HanSec gets their hands on the rest of the explosives. The hope was, they would assume, that the missing small amount had already been used."

"And then the large amount blew up spectacularly", Pakhet ended.

Herr Schmidt gave a dry, almost sardonic smile. "Indeed."

"And HanSec knows that it was not all the stolen explosives, that blew up?"

"They might. Worse: The entire ordeal has been labelled as a terrorist attack."

"Meaning: If some of the explosives would show up elsewhere, HanSec would connect that to the terrorist attack. And that should not happen."

To this Herr Schmidt nodded.

"I still don't see the problem", Dacart complained. The young man had sat down on one of the chairs again and looked annoyed. "How are they supposed to know, that those explosives are part of the stuff that blew up?!"

Pakhet looked at him. By now she was pretty sure, that he had had been directly involved with the explosion. So it was probably his fault, making him defensive. Also he did not seem to be the brightest bulb in the box. "Explosives are ID'ed", she explained. "There are micro IDs in officially registered explosives. Also registered

explosives often come with a certain chemical to mark them. So if these explosives you stole are used, it can be tracked back to the big boom from today."

"I thought you were muscle?", the young elf – Murphy – remarked.

"Muscle needs to know drek about weapons, too", she replied.

Herr Schmidt rolled his eyes. "She is right. As it is, the explosives are worthless to me." Silence.

Pakhet noted, she had at least to a degree managed to piss off at least half of the group. Half of this seemed to be rather organized. Who would send a group to an explosive retrieval, when none of them had any idea how explosives worked.

At the doorway Kah Pak stepped aside, to let a man – another human, seemingly older than the others – step inside. As the man was carrying a med kit, she had to assume that was "Doctor Heidenstein" as the young elf had said.

"Thing is", chrome-head finally said, "we need a plan to either get other explosives or make those explosives usable."

"What about hacking?", Pakhet asked.

"Oh yeah", chrome-head replied sarcastically, "never would have thought of that. Tried that. Ended with my deck almost fried and Hazel, the other decker, out cold. HanSec has good Server protections. And I might add: It is quite possible, that there is at least one offline copy about the stolen explosives, that cannot be accessed via the matrix."

"We would need to get into HanSec", Dacart muttered.

Unable to help herself Pakhet gave a short laugh. "Yeah, that sounds like fun!"

"That would be suicide", Kah Pak muttered. Somehow this did not seem to amuse him. Another silent pause. It was clear, that the group was out of ideas. Probably why they had hired more runners. Though Pakhet was not sure, why they did not just hire an explosives specialist, who would have been able to solve this in no time. Because it would have been obvious? Well, while Michael was maybe overly well connected: He had figured out the connection out in no time as it was.

"What is about stealing other explosives?", Baramaus asked after a while.

"No chance", Herr Schmidt replied quickly. Right now the only explosives are either off the map and hard to find or in the storages of mega facilities."

When nobody else offered any ideas, Pakhet gave a sigh. "With the right equipment it would be possible to find out, how the explosive is ID'ed. Apart from certain chemical markers, most IDs can either be removed or overwritten."

Chrome-head shot her a gaze. "And you know how to do that?"

"I am not specialist, but I probably could find out, how it is ID'ed at least. Problem: I don't have the equipment."

Doctor Heidenstein, who had taken the seat next to Herr Schmidt and had been silent till now, cleared his throat. "I think the equipment needed would be chemical equipment, right?"

"And scanners", Pakhet replied.

"I could provide both, if we were able to get them here", he said.

With a short nod, Pakhet looked at Herr Schmidt. Even though he just seemed to be another Johnson, this would be his decision after all.

"We are not going to dissect explosives in this house", he replied to the unspoken question. "If you find another place, you might as well try."

"What about getting a big car or something? A truck?"

Everyone looked at Dacart, who had spoken.

It was actually not too bad of an idea, Pakhet had to admit.

"What about the costs?", chrome-head said.

"You can loan one", Pakhet replied. "And I think as a decker you would be able to disable security systems in a rented truck."

Chrome-head gave another grunt. "Of course."

Suddenly Dacart seemed to be delighted. "Then can I drive the truck?"

For a moment Pakhet looked at him considering whether she was to tell him, that rented vehicles normally did not come with a manual drive. She decided against it. Instead she replied: "Of course you can. We should get one, right now."

"Where do you want to get a truck from at this hour?", Kah Pak asked.

Everyone looked at him and according to their faces, they seemed to think the same: Was he not aware of the matrix?

"We order one", Pakhet said and took out her comlink. She was no decker, nor did she bother to do much with electronics, but it was enough – by far – to find the next car rental service, that also offered trucks and reserve one. "What about the money?", she then asked Herr Schmidt.

"The expenses will be covered later", he said with a sigh. "I just have to caution you all, to not overdo it." His voice sounded bitter and Pakhet could well understand why. After all the actual constituent probably had given him a certain budget in which all of this – additional runners and all which was to follow – had not been included.

"Okay." She got up and looked over to Dacart. "Well then, I would say, we should get going, so everyone can get over with that." For a moment she hesitated. On her way here she had seen HanSec mobile control stations. While she had licenses for all her weapons, those might still lead to the wrong questions. "Also, take care of these." She put the two pistols she was carrying on the table. After all she still had the cyber-pistols for the worst case scenario.

"Alright!" The young man grinned and by now seemed in better mood than the rest of the group.

Before leaving Pakhet turned around. "I guess we will be back in an hour or so." The only reply she got, was a lot of nodding. So with a shrug she left and got back to her Jack Rabbit.

"Interesting colour choice", Dacart commented, when he saw the car. "I like it."

Pakhet just raised an eyebrow and did not reply. She unlocked the car and got onto the driver's seat, before waiting for Dacart to get in. Once the young man was buckled up, she started the motor and gave her comlink the command to display the navigation in AR.

Moving of she shot the adept a side gaze. "So, what did happen with the big boom there?", she asked. She was pretty sure, that he somehow had been more involved with the explosion, than the rest of the group. At least it seemed, as if the rest of them had been more annoyed than anything else, while Dacart had been a bit more awkward, when she had asked before.

Once again he seemed to be a bit ashamed and gave her a grin. "Well, it was really just bad luck, you know?"

"Bad luck, eh?", she said.

"Yeah, Tower and I infiltrated this gang to get the explosives from them but their stupid dogs somehow sniffed us out or something. So naturally we killed them, but the gangers didn't like that, so a fight broke loose and Tower ignited the stuff."

Pakhet raised an eyebrow. "So... Who is Tower?"

"My ork buddy", Dacart replied. "He stayed with the... Err... I mean he stayed behind, after we escaped."

Pakhet did not reply. Her gaze once again concentrated on the road in front of them.

While there was pretty much no traffic, this was still Harburg – Harburg after a big explosion – so who knew what could happen.

But then she noticed something else. At first she had assumed, that the smell from inside had stuck in her nose, but by now it should be out and yet she was still smelling it. And it still stunk.

She activated her atmosphere sensor, that promptly returned her results suggesting the same kind of chemicals in the air, one would normally find somewhere else.

"Say, Dacart", she muttered, "that escape of yours. Did it involve swimming in the sewers?"

"No", he replied. "We had to dive."

"Why did I even ask?" She sighed.

"And we met a toxic spirit", he added. "And I managed to talk it to letting us go."

Pakhet rolled her eyes. "Great."

They almost had reached the border to Harburg and had been lucky so far to neither get controlled by HanSec, nor to run into a gang out for problems. And somehow, thankfully, it stayed that way.

"Do you want to see a video of me talking to the toxic spirit?", Dacart suddenly asked. Pakhet sighed. "Maybe later." The AR map displayed a near gas station. Well, at least they would have something against the smell.

So after a few minutes Dacart was sitting on the passenger seat, holding a couple of air fresheners.

Pakhet knew well enough, that it only masked the stink, but at least she had not to smell it right now. Still she would have to have the car cleaned after this. Why had she not noticed this before? She should have taken somebody else along.

"I sure hope, we don't have to pay for cleaning the truck", she muttered, when they drove up next to the car rental – one of the fully automated shops.

"So, where is the truck?", Dacart wondered, looking at the closed garage doors.

Pakhet did not reply, just looked at the garage number send to her via mail, before going up to the garage. It had a security panel next to it, in which she typed the passport she had been sent. Then she inserted a cred stick with enough nuyen to rent the truck for 24 hours.

The garage door opened, revealing a white moving van.

"Neat", commented Dacart.