

Machines

Hamburg in the shadows

Von Alaiya

VI – Stick to the rules

About an hour later and without any increase in Pakhet's mood, they found themselves again in Neue Mitte. Heidenstein had made several calls, but to no further results. This seemed to be the search for a needle in a haystack, which was not exactly surprising. If all their assumptions were somehow correct, Winter would be a runner from outside the city. And while it was already hard enough to locate local runners, it was the entire idea of hiring outsiders to have somebody almost unlocatable.

There was nobody she knew apart from Michael, who could have met that guy. She hated to admit it, but right now her best plan was still to lay a trap in front of the Bismarck Memorial – and she really did not like that plan.

Heidenstein was still talking to somebody over comlink, when a message came in from Dacart: "Meet us at the Taxi Zentrale." He had not thought of adding the address, but a quick web search revealed, that it was at the southern border of Neue Mitte.

"Well..." Pakhet was turning the car around, when Heidenstein finally hung up.

She shot him a side glance. "Got the message, too?"

"Yes. And I would kindly ask you, to let me off at the bar. There is a emergency that has to be taken care of."

Pakhet sighed. "Alright." She was still annoyed with him, that he had just ignored her warning, but as he was the one bearing the consequences, she had said no more. But even as she was annoyed about it, Heidenstein seemed to be the only somewhat reasonable person in that entire bunch, and she could not help but imagine the worst scenarios for what was to come.

But of course she let him of that the Druide.

"Thank you", Heidenstein said when they parked.

"No problem", she said with a bit of sarcasm in her voice.

For a moment he watched her. "Also: Thanks for the warning. I appreciate the concern."

Pakhet just rolled her eyes and snorted. "I am not concerned. I just don't want to get into problems because of it." Still she could not help but give a short smirk.

Heidenstein paused for a moment. "I'll try to join you guys later on." Once again he hesitated, before taking out a gun and handing it to her. "Do me a favour: If you find that guy and I am not there, use this and don't let any of the others shoot the guy."

She took the gun. It was about the size of a heavy pistole, but lighter. "A dart pistole?" At that Heidenstein nodded. "Filled with narcoject. It should knock the guy out without killing him."

"Handy", Pakhet muttered to herself, while still weighting the gun in her hand to get a better feeling for it. Then she looked at Heidenstein and nodded. "Well, I will try to keep those slobs from killing the guy. That is, if they have not started killing somebody yet..."

Heidenstein smiled. "Thanks." With that he got out of the car. "As I said, I'll try to join you guys later. Till then." He closed the car door and Pakhet gave another sigh. Somehow she had the feeling, that she should get going, before the others actually did start a shoot out at the cab office.

Thankfully she found the group sitting in their van in front of the office complex, that – according to a large sign in front of it – also hosted the Hamburger Taxi Zentrale. The van's doors where closed, but Dacart opened, when she knocked.

"Found out anything?", she asked – once again without saying so much as "hello".

"Yes!" Dacart grinned. "Slap found out the number of the taxi he had taken the last time!"

Doubtingly Pakhet looked at him. "Great. And now?"

Slap looked at her through the door leading into the back area of the van, where the two mages were sitting, too. "Now we need to hack into the system of the central to find out who drove that taxi on that date."

"That might be worth something", Pakhet admitted. "The guy apparently pays the taxi driver to wait for him and bring him home after the auction."

"Home?", Slap asked.

"Well, maybe back to the memorial. I don't know. That was all we could find out."

It was then, that Kah Pak looked up. "Where is Heidenstein?"

"Hospital. Emergency." Pakhet shrugged. "You will have to put up with me."

Apparently the others – well, most of the others, as at least Dacart seemed to be content with the entire situation – were as happy with this situation as Pakhet was. While Baramus looked at her with clear hostility, chrome-head seemed to be annoyed and Kah Pak mostly indifferent. And they really planned to just go into the office like this?

It seemed that way. As soon as Pakhet opened the door again, everybody stood up. Because this really was not at all suspicious, eh?

"You're sure you all wanna come?", she asked grudgingly.

"Of course", Baramus said. "Problem with that."

"No, not at all." Her voice was once more gushing with sarcasm. Still, she jumped out of the van and just swore to herself to get the hell out of there, if anyone of them tried to do something stupid.

Well, at least there were not many pedestrians in the area. This was one those streets, where the buildings were mostly used for office and storage, barely as living quarters. Most of the buildings looked like they had been build in the last century as they were walls with windows instead of windows with some structural elements, but they still were an rather good condition – apart from a few graffiti on the mostly white or pale yellow walls.

How long would it take HanSec to get here? Not long enough.

To make matters worse Baramus seemed to be rather content to take the lead. Somehow she had the feeling, that he would be the one who went in shooting first. Hurrying to keep up with him and Dacart, she crossed the street and entered the building together with them.

The cab office was on ground level of the building. Sliding door made out of bulletproof glass lead into a mostly white corridor, that lead straight through the

building into a parking lot – apparently the cab depot. To their right was a reception desk, next to which a closed door seemed to lead into the office area or maybe to a staircase.

A woman in her early forties sat behind the also white reception desk, her eyes scanning a computer screen. She had curly brown hair and wore a dark greyish woman's suit. When all of them entered she looked up.

“Good day”, she greeted them formally and gave them a fake smile. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“We are in need for a cab”, Baramesus said, his smile as fake as hers.

“Of course. I can call one for you. Just wait a moment. Why haven't you called?” She punched something into her keyboard, but Baramesus leaned forward and hindered her sight on the screen.

“We are actually in need for a very certain cab”, he quickly said.

Now the woman seemed to get insecure, maybe even frightened. “What do you want?”

“Nothing. Just the cab with the number 2481”, Baramesus purred.

Pakhet saw the woman's hand slowly reaching underneath her desk, probably to press a panic button. “Don't!”, she shouted. With one step she was at the desk and shoved Baramesus aside, chrome-head right besides her.

“There is no need for that”, Slap insured her. “We actually don't even need a cab.”

The woman eyed at them suspiciously. “Then you should go.”

“Not so hasty”, Slap said. “See, we actually just need for you to take a short coffee break. You look really tired and I am sure you have deserved one.”

She shook her head. “I would loose my job.”

“I'll make sure nobody will know”, chrome-head said, but the woman still hesitated.

With a sigh Pakhet got out a credstick and casually shoved it over the desk to the woman. “See, this stick is loaded with 250 Nuyen. Just for you to take a short break.”

“That will probably be the best paid coffee break, you will ever get”, Slap said.

It took a moment for the woman to make her decision, then she nodded, let the credstick glide up her sleeve and stood up. “If you excuse me, I need to take a short break”, she said out loud and left through a door behind the reception desk.

As soon as the door had closed behind her, chrome-head jumped over the desk and got right to work.

“Nice one”, Dacart said, while Slap jacked himself in.

Nervously they waited for the decker to finish his job. Pakhet's hand was resting on the desk, but she was ready to fire the cyber-guns at any time. Yet – much to her relief – nothing happened. Nobody came and whoever was doing security here, was certainly not minding them too much.

Finally after maybe a minute chrome-head jacked himself out. He opened his eyes and looked around, as if to check that there was nothing going on. “Alright. I ordered the driver over and deleted all video evidence we have been here.”

“Good”, Pakhet nodded. “To where have you ordered the driver?”

“A block away”, he replied and once more got over the reception desk.

“Then we should get going”, Baramesus said and once more was the person first out of the building.

The others followed. This was going better then Pakhet had hoped for, but then again it was to early to relax. After all, there was still a lot that could go wrong. Hell, from all they knew the woman from the reception could have called HanSec by now.

But there was no HanSec car coming for them. They reached the address to which

Slap had ordered the cab and waited for about ten minutes, until a taxi held in front of them. "You've ordered a cab?", the ork driver asked. He seemed to be in his late twenties, making him look like a human at the end of his thirties, his hair already being salt and pepper. The black Jacket he wore, was obviously armoured lightly and featured the logo of his company.

"Yep", Barameus said before any of the others could answer. "Right on time."

The doors on their side opened and Dacart, Pakhet and Kah Pak took place on the back seat, while Barameus slumped in on the passenger's seat. Only chrome-head did not get inside, but instead nonchalantly opened trunk.

The ork turned around. "What is he doing?"

"Nothing", Pakhet replied and cursed the decker. She could think as much that he tried to get some data out of the cab, but he could have been more discrete about it.

"Don't worry about him", Barameus said, too, and smiled at the ork. "Actually we wanted to ask you a few questions."

Alright, so nobody here planned on doing this the innocuous way. Great. They did know there were ways to just coincidentally come to speak of the topic about which you actually wanted to ask questions?

"What about?" There was an audible hint of fear in his voice.

"Nothing you need to worry about", Pakhet quickly insured him. "We just want information about this guy." She showed him the holopic. "You drove him last week." But the driver did not reply. Instead his gaze suddenly concentrated on something in the hands of Barameus.

Pakhet followed his gaze, only to see a gun pointed at the ork, who now reached for something, that most certainly was another panic button.

"Not so fast", Barameus said and held his hand.

"What do you guys want?", the driver stuttered.

"Barameus, put the gun down", Pakhet whispered, but the mage did not comply. Indeed he acted, as if he had not heard her and kept his eyes fixed on the panicking ork.

"Barameus!", Pakhet repeated – louder this time.

This time the mage shot her a short, angry gaze. "You have no right to tell me what to do!"

The ork used this moment of distraction. He opened the cab's door and hasted outside, running the way they had come.

"Oh damn it", shouted Pakhet, opened the door to her left, shoved Kah Pak outside and started to pursue the ork.

While being muscular the ork was not a fast runner. He was no match for her training and she had reached him after only fifteen meters. With a tackle she pressed him to the ground and hissed: "Damn it, we just want to talk!"

The ork managed to turn onto his back. "Doesn't look like it!", he grunted.

Just in time Pakhet realized there was a gun in his hand, pointed at her. She yanked his arm up and the shot hit the nearest building's wall. With enough force applied to his wrist, he had to let go of the weapon. "Don't be stupid", she growled and set him back on his feet, just to press him against the next wall. "Listen. At least I just want to talk." She showed him the picture again. "You have driven him. From where, to where?"

The realisation, that he was unable to fight back, dawned in his eyes. "I don't know him." But no matter how much emphasis he laid into this words, his mimic made it obvious that he was lying.

"I don't believe you!"

The ork hesitated, looked from her face, to the holopic, to the others. "Alright. I got him at the Bismarck Memorial and drove him to the old airport. He paid extra for me to drive through the ghul area."

"And he paid you to stay at the airport, while he was conduction business there, right?", Pakhet asked.

Again some hesitation. Then: "Yes."

"Where did you drive him after that?"

"To Harburg. The region north to the sprawl. There is a laundry shop, Beckers Wäsche und Korrekturschneiderei, and he asked me to let him out there."

Pakhet let go of him. "Thank you", she said and did not do anything, when he just turned around to run.

Slap gave a loud sigh. "This really would not have been necessary. I've got the same info."

The laundry shop was in an area of Harburg, that was not as obviously part of the sprawl then as the street Herr Schmidt had had his save-house in. There were relatively few bullet holes in the walls and most of the windows were intact. There were even a few shops still conducting business here and it seemed that quite a few of this buildings were lived in. The question remaining was, if they could find the mysterious Mr. Winter here or if it was going to be a dead end.

She looked at the laundry shop, while waiting for the others to park the van. She swore to herself to keep on her own for a while, after all this was done and be it just as a bodyguard.

When the van finally had halted and the others got out of it, she also got out of her Jackrabbit. The others were still looking around and Pakhet noted, that there now was a pistol stuck into Kah Pak's belt – seemingly the one used by the cab driver.

She sighed, but went towards them. "So, what do you plan to do next?"

"Well, what do you plan?", Barameus snarled sarcastically.

"Not randomly pointing guns at people for a start." Was it irony for her – the supposed street sam – saying that?

"Can I have the holopic, Pakhet?", Dacart asked with a smile.

"What for?"

His smile turned into a grin. "Wanted to ask in the laundry shop, whether they have seen the guy."

Why was it so sad, that the fool out of all was the one with the most reasonable idea?

"Here." She handed him the metalink.

"Thanks!" And with that he went into the shop.

Through the front window they watched Dacart talk with a woman working at the shop. They talked for quite a while and it seemed that the woman described something, gesticulating midly. Then, after maybe three or four minutes Dacart came out, his grin even broader.

"The guy comes here about once a month and stays at that house", he announced pointing at a building a few houses away. "The lady in there said, she had seen him around a few times. Last time this morning." He handed Pakhet the metalink back.

For a moment a smirk crossed Pakhet's face. This really went smoother, then she had thought. Of course they needed to get into the house, but that tended to not be that much of a problem. At least not in an area like this.

"Then let's go over there", Kah Pak said with calm voice.

"Do we know how to get inside?" Baramus still sounded aggressive, while they went towards the house.

"Ringing the doorbell tends to work", Pakhet said.

"Yeah, right, Winter will buzz us in..."

"He might not, but others might." She smiled, when they reached the house.

The house seemed to have six floors, making it more likely, that the typical tenant would not know all his neighbours. Not all of the sixteen bell signs were lettered and it was pretty likely, that one of those nameless bells was linked to the flat where Winter staid. Except of course if whoever had rented that flat had thought ahead.

Well, there was no need to overthink it. She just pressed a couple of buttons and waited for a voice to answer from the intercom.

Only after a few seconds a woman's voice answered. "Hello? Who is there?"

"Err, yes. Err, here is Mrs. Schlütter from the third floor." She faked some insecurity, because speaking to self conscious was actually much more unnatural in this kind of situation. "Err, my key does not work for the front door. Could you buzz me in?"

For a moment there was silence. Then a kind reply: "Sure." The buzzer sounded.

"Thank you!", Pakhet purred at the intercom and opened the door. She looked around to the others and indicated them to stay.

She went into the staircase and went up the stairs a bit. "Thank you!", she shouted upwards, just in case the woman who had buzzed her in, was listening, and went up to the third floor, where she waited for a moment.

After a minute or two, she went down again, to let the others inside.

"Finally", Baramus muttered, when she opened the door.

"You are welcome", she replied with a sigh. "Now we just need to find the right flat."

"Any ideas?", chrome-head asked.

"Well, for now eliminate the flats with children's shoes in front of them and try out the others."

"And what do we tell them, if it is somebody else?"

Kah Pak answered hesitantly: "We could just say we are from a church or something."

"That works", Pakhet concluded.

And so they started off. There were only two flats on the first floor. One of them seemed to be inhabited by a family, considering the coloured picture on the door. They rang the other door bell, but nobody opened. And so they continued on the second floor. This had three apartment doors. In front of one was a pink doormat with children's shoes standing on it, while one of the others had a doormat saying "welcome" on it. The last apartment had neither. The only thing standing in front of it, was a pair of dirty boots.

"What about that one?", Slap asked, pointing to the door with the dirty boots in front. But Dacart shook his head. "I would try this one." He pointed at the one with the "welcome" mat.

"Or we could try both", Pakhet said with a sigh. She turned towards the door with the mat in front of it and pressed to bell button.

Once more it seemed that nothing was happening and she was almost turning around to try out the other door, when the first one opened.

"What are you guys doing here?", a voice asked.

There was a man standing in the door and it was clearly the guy they were looking for. This realisation appeared on all their faces, but it was Dacart that answered.

"Actually, we are looking for you", he said.

The guy tried to throw the door shut, but Pakhet was quicker. She put her arm in

between door and frame, while she drew the gun, Heidenstein had given her. While throwing the door open again, she aimed and shot the guy, who was running down the apartments corridor, right in the neck.

He managed to reach the next door, but then collapsed onto the floor.

It took Pakhet only a second to be next to him and check his heartbeat. It was a bit irregular, but in general he seemed to be alright. Still he hoped that Heidenstein would be able to take a look at him later on, as she also did not know, how long the effect of Narcoject would last.

"That was easy", Dacart commented and seemed to be a bit disappointed.

"Let's take a look, if he has anything nice." Barameus went for the room, Winter had wanted to enter, before he had collapsed and started to look around.

Chrome-head on the other hand had a more pressing concern. "What do we do with him, now?"

Before she answered, Pakhet made sure, that Winter was in a stable position – after all she really had no interest in killing him. She knew as well as chrome-head, that they could not stay here, in case the guy had allies, who would come for him. She could not suppress a sigh, because she could only think of one place, where they could put him. "Well, I have rented a garage space in Bergedorf..."

When they arrived at the building, that housed several rentable garage spaces with enough space to either park about two cars or put a lot of stuff in it. Pakhet mostly used it to park one of her motorcycles and house a small mechanic shop, so she was able to do repairs on her own. She still did not like to show the rest of the bunch here, but what choice did she have? She knew that Heidenstein would not like them bringing the guy to his street clinic and they did not have any other option.

They already had been lucky, as they had seen HanSec arrive, not long after they had left the building.

She parked the Jackrabbit outside the garage building and went over to the van, that had been parked a bit down the street. "We can bring him in. But we should be careful."

After all it was still her, who would have to carry the guy – as it turned out that there was indeed a plain lack of muscle in this runner team. She would have liked it better, if the guy had been able to walk, as nothing screamed "criminal activity" the way carrying a lifeless body did. Still they seemed to be lucky as once again only a few people were around and did not seem to pay them much attention.

"I just hope you take care of the cams, Slap", Pakhet muttered, while they went through the broad hallway of the building.

"Of course", the decker whispered back.

They took the lift. Pakhet really had no interest in carrying the body up to the third floor, where her garage space was located. Thankfully the gate opened by itself, as her commlink was sending the confirmation code, while she neared the space.

"Well, I guess make yourself at home", she said, while laying winter on the counter of the mechanic shop, as she did not have anything like a bed. Then she shut the gate and activated the jammer.

The other four looked around doubtingly. After all the garage was bare of mostly everything. There was her second motorcycle, there were many, many mechanical tools, there was a coffee machine and two cups and there was a small trunk, she used to store spare pistols, a few clothes and a sleeping sack – thinks she needed in case she had to get out of town quickly. Well, and there were a few gym equipments she

had not used in a while.

After a while Kah Pak and Slap both sat down on the floor, while Baramaus sat down on the trunk muttering something under his breath, she could not understand. Dacart went towards the motorcycle.

"Don't touch that", she said, while taking out her commlink. "I am going to phone the doc." Nobody objected and so she just dialled his number and got out of the door located next to the gate, to get out of the reach of the jammer.

She had to wait several rings, until he picked up. "Yes? Heidenstein here."

"It's Pakhet", she replied. "When can you come? We could kinda need your help here?"

"What has happened?" He sounded alarmed.

"Nothing much. We found the guy and narcojected him. He is unconscious and you should take a look at him."

"Where are you now?", he asked and she named the address.

"On the third floor. Number 37."

"Alright. I will come over. But I still have a patient so it might be an hour or so."

Pakhet sighed. "Alright. And Doc?"

"Yes?"

"Could you bring a stretcher or something like that?"

Heidenstein hesitated for a moment. "Well, I have something. But you will have to get me. I don't have anything to transport it with."

For a moment Pakhet thought about it. She really did not want to leave Winter alone with those idiots for too long, so she really did not feel comfortable with it. "I guess I can send Dacart with the van."

"Okay. Tell him to be at the hospital in thirty minutes."

"Okay. Till then." She hung up and gave another sigh. Sadly this would barely be an excuse to get rid of the rest of them, but maybe Dacart and Baramaus. She would be glad if the mage was not around anymore as she really could not stand him.

She returned into the garage space. "Dacart?", she asked.

"Yes?", he replied.

"Can you get the doc in half an hour?"

He grinned. "Sure."

Pakhet got out a cred stick and loaded it with 100 Nuyen. "And if you guys want to sit down: Go now and get yourselves a few camping chairs."

"What a great idea", Baramaus commented sarcastically.

"And take Baramaus along", Pakhet quickly added.

"Why me?", the mage complained.

"Because I say so and I pay for that shit. Oh, and this is my garage."

He glared at her, but did not say something.

For a while Dacart said nothing, but then he got up and smiled at Baramaus. "Let's go."

"Whatever", the mage muttered.

And so they went.

While Pakhet was not particularly fond of chrome-head and the shaman either, both of them were at least not annoying, as they mostly kept to themselves. Slap soon started to do something in the matrix – hopefully hacking the garage's security system – and Kah Pak sat just there, silent, meditating Pakhet assumed.

She herself sat down on the trunk and started to browse the matrix in AR. She read through a few articles. Some about local politics and sports, some about new weapons.

And so they sat in silence. Winter did not wake up and the three of them minded their own business.

About an hour passed till there was a knocking outside announcing the arrival of Heidenstein, Dacart and Barameus. As neither chrome-head, nor the elf moved – and it was not their space anyway – Pakhet opened the door. Indeed both Barameus and Dacart carried two chairs, while Heidenstein pushing a stretcher.

He seemed to be about to say something, but then realized, that neither Slap nor Kah Pak seemed to be properly conscious. So she shrugged and looked over at Winter.

“Well, then let's take a look at the patient”, he said and somehow sounded tired. He put the stretcher in place right beside the working bench.

Pakhet just nodded and lifted Winter up to properly lay him on the stretcher.

Heidenstein spent some time looking at Winter, feeling his pulse, checking his iris reflex, before rolling him on his back. “He seems to have a slight overdose, but nothing dramatical. Question is, what we do with him now?”

“Can we keep him unconscious till tomorrow in the evening?”, Pakhet asked. She knew that it would not be exactly healthy for the guy to be drugged unconscious for such an extended period of time, but it probably was the easiest way to fulfil their job.

“I could give him another drug to just keep him asleep”, Heidenstein said.

But Barameus, who by now had folded out one of the chairs and sat on it arms crossed, objected: “No! I want to question this guy. I want to know why our dear Johnson does not want him to be at the auction.”

“Probably because she wants a certain item”, Dacart said. “Nothing too complicated.”

“Yeah, but if he really is a runner, he is paid for being there”, Barameus said. “And we could go in his place. Being paid twice.”

Once again Pakhet could not help but snort. “Yeah, great way to build bad rep. Betraying a Johnson!”

“Well, technically we would not betray the Johnson”, Kah Pak suddenly said, apparently awake now.

Heidenstein looked at him an eyebrow raised.

“Sure”, Pakhet commented dryly.

“Well, we were hired to keep him from going to the auction”, Barameus said and pointed at the unconscious Winter. “It was our Johnson who failed to mention that we should keep anybody from attending that auction for his Johnson.”

“Oh noes”, Pakhet interposed sardonically, “a Johnson that assumes we can think for ourselves.”

“As I see it, she just failed to give clear instructions”, Barameus continued. “That is not our fault. After all, we can get money for two runs here.”

“And ruin our chances to ever get hired by her again”, Heidenstein concluded.

“So?” Kah Pak shrugged. “Also: Why can't we just ask him, what all this is about and then talk about what we'll do about it.”

The doc crossed his arms. “Because waking him up, putting him to sleep, waking him up again and so on gets more dangerous every time we do it.”

“Well, that's his problem”, Barameus said.

“I certainly won't allow an unconscious guy to be murdered”, Pakhet replied angrily.

“Especially as our Johnson specifically asked for us to try and not kill him.”

Dacart seemed uneasy, but finally interjected: “Can't we just... I don't know: Wake him up, talk to him and then see what to do with him? Maybe we don't need to put him back to sleep. Maybe he cooperates?”

A few angry gazes were directed at Dacart, who sat back down with a sigh, while

Heidenstein shrugged.

"The narcoject will wear off soon", he said. "I will prepare a safer anaesthetic and you can question him in the meantime, if you really think you must." It was clear he did not like it, but he seemed to have no interest in further discussion.

Pakhet still glared at Barameus, but just leaned against the workbench, before keeping an eye on Winter. "Should we bind him up?", she then asked Heidenstein.

"Why haven't you already?", he replied with a sigh.

"Cause I tried to not kill him", she said with a shrug, before getting out a pair of handcuffs from the trunk to shackle Winter to the stretcher.

"You know there are ways to bind up unconscious people without endangering them?", he said and turned around to place his med-kit on the workbench. He seemed eager to end the discussion.

Once again Pakhet snorted. "Right", she muttered annoyed. "Then you try to carry around the body next time." But Heidenstein did not reply anything and so she finally went over to sit down on the trunk again, angrily eyeing at everyone around.

While they effectively waiting for Winter to wake up, Heidenstein seemed busy doing a couple of tests on the guy. He took some blood and connected him to a biomonitor. Dacart had gone silent – he genuinely seemed to care about them getting along, which seemed awfully naïve. He sat in his chair, pouted and had gotten out his commlink to play with some app, while Barameus leaned in his chair arms crossed and angrily eyeing at both Pakhet and Heidenstein. Even Kah Pak, who had seemed to be all square till now, looked rather discontent.

Well, they would have fun working together as a team, Pakhet thought and was thankful she would not be part of that.

After a while Slap opened his eyes again and at first seemed to be surprised about the chairs and the stretcher, but did not say anything. In fact it was Heidenstein, who in the end broke the silence.

"He is waking up", he said and the graph on the biomonitor seemed to confirm his words.

Pakhet stood up, but only leaned against the workbench once again, as she did not really want to get involved in the questioning. She kinda pitied the poor guy, who after all had only done his job – a job even, that had not been supposed to involve fighting of any sort. He probably was a face or something like that most likely meaning that he was able to hold a gun, but more or less unable to hit something with it.

Barameus, Kah Pak and Dacart meanwhile all came towards the stretcher, where Heidenstein was already standing, checking on Winter's vitals. Only Slap, who had missed out on the prior discussion stayed back, though he had taken up his hat and set it back on his head.

Winter started to blink and shortly opened his eyes, before closing them again. It was hard for him, to keep them opened and he needed a few tries to succeed and be able to look around. Then he tried to move his hands and noticed the handcuffs. His face clearly showed how the realisation of what had happened crept into his mind.

He tried to say something, but coughed.

Pakhet sighed and filled one of her cups with water from the tap on the wall, before wordlessly handing it Heidenstein.

"Here", he said and purred a bit of the water down Winter's throat.

Winter swallowed slowly and then looked at them, half afraid, half angry. "Who are you guys?", he said with husky voice. "What do you want from me?"

"Actually we want nothing from you", Dacart said smilingly. "We were just hired to keep you away from tomorrows auction."

Once again Winter coughed. "You won't be able to. People will come looking for me!"

"Sure", Barameus replied. Once again there was a gun in his hand and Pakhet had the strange feeling of wanting to strangle him. "Who is coming?"

"My constituent of course!", Winter said after a moment.

"Yeah." Barameus' voice was gushing with malice. "Sure."

"Look", Dacart quickly interjected. "We don't want to kill you. Those two here" – he gesticulated towards Barameus and Kah Pak – "just have a few questions and then we will put you back asleep."

Now it was Winter who shot them an unbelieving gaze. "Sure..."

Pakhet felt the strong urge to interject into the conversation. After all this went a way she really did not like and she was pretty sure that Barameus was indeed willing to use the gun once he was at the end of his patience.

"Shut up", Barameus hissed at Dacart, before talking to Winter again. "You are runner, like us, right?"

Heidenstein shot him an angry look. "Should I just put him back to sleep again?" He phrased it like a casual question, but something in his tone made clear that he was actually threatening the mage, his eye fixated on the drawn gun.

For a moment Barameus did not reply anything but rather shot back another angry look, but then lowered his gun, though he did not put it away. "Sure, we could put him back to sleep", he said, his voice once again full of sarcasm.

"You are a bunch of assholes", Winter muttered under his breath, but loud enough that everybody could hear them.

"Listen", Kah Pak now said. "Just tell us, what we want to know and everything will be over."

"Because you'll kill me", Winter said gravely.

Pakhet growled. "For heaven's sake. We won't kill you! I won't allow those idiots to kill you. Let's just get this over with!"

At that Dacart nodded. "What she said."

Winter stayed silent and looked at them. One could almost see the wheels in his head turning as he calculated his chances to get out of this alive. "Alright. I'll tell you. But under one condition: You get me out of the city once this is over."

"Promise!", Dacart exclaimed.

Barameus said nothing, while Kah Pak at least nodded.

This seemed to be enough for him, though he still waited for a moment. "Okay. I'm hired by the same Johnson once a month to go to an auction in Hamburg or Berlin mostly. Black market auction for weapons mostly. I get the information about the item I should bid for the morning before the auction, bid on it and get paid for it."

"Who is your Johnson?", Barameus asked.

"I don't know. Have only talked to him on phone." He saw the questioning look on Barameus face. "His number is on my commlink. I guess you've got that one, too, right?"

"Yes", Kah Pak replied.

Winter sighed. He tried to overplay his fear with annoyance. "Well, then just put me under again, okay?"

For a moment Heidenstein waited if somebody objected. The he nodded and got a syringe, he had prepared before from the workbench. "It will just put you to sleep", he said, when Winter cringed. Then he gave him the shot and it only took Winter about

ten seconds to fall back asleep.

Pakhet noticed that Winter's pulse was more regular – according to the biomonitor – then it had been under narcoject.

“Oh drek”, Barameus suddenly said, when he restarted the comlink they had stolen from Winter. “We need to wake him up again!”

“No”, was all Heidenstein said to that.

“Why?”, asked Pakhet.

“We need his password to activate this!”

Chrome-head gave a sigh and took the commlink. “You forget you have me.”

“So you really want to phone his Johnson?”, Dacart asked meekly.

“Why not?”, Barameus said with a determined smile.

Pakhet really had to keep herself under control, as she was really thorn between just punching that mage on the nose or putting a narcoject dart in his neck – after all she still had the dart gun. Still she did neither, but just gave another snort. “Okay. If you want to betray our Johnson, then do so, but leave the rest of us out of it.”

Barameus just shrugged. “By all means, it is your loss.”

“What is this about?”, Slap asked and Dacart was the first one to explain.

“Short version: They” – Dacart pointed at Barameus and Kah Pak – “want to talk to his” – he pointed at Winter – “Johnson to do his job for him.”

“Our Johnson had failed to specify that nobody should bid for his Johnson”, Kah Pak said calmly.

Chrome-head thought about it for a moment. “Actually that sounds like a good idea.”

“It doesn't”, Pakhet muttered. “But if you must: Do whatever you want, but keep me out of it.”

“Me, too”, Heidenstein agreed.

Dacart hesitated, looking at Kah Pak, Slap and Barameus. “Well, I don't think it is a good idea either... I don't want to get bad rep. After all we got the run through my fixer, right?”

Barameus just gave another shrug. “Whatever. You don't need to come along.”

At this Pakhet shook her head. “I think you don't understand me properly: If you want to phone that guy I cannot hinder you – well, at least not without shooting you, and believe me, I am tempted right now. But I can fucking throw you out of this garage.”

She pointed at the door.

“Geez, calm down”, chrome-head said.

Angrily Pakhet looked at the three of them. “Do you really want to do this.”

“Of course!”, Barameus said. “And I...” But Pakhet did not let him finish.

“Then get out!”

The mood in the garage with the cool neon lighting was pretty bad, after the three had left. Dacart really seemed to be down about the group breaking up like that, while Pakhet was still boiling on the inside. The only reason that her hands were not shaking in anger when she made some coffee was the stabilizer of the cyber-arms.

Were the three of them really such idiots? It was just as if they did now know about any street rules. She could well imagine that Barameus would make a deal with a dragon first chance he got. Why had she to get stuck with them?

She tried to calm herself. After all, she told herself, she would not have to deal with them anymore after this was done. Yeah, till tomorrow she would have to sit an unconscious guy together with Heidenstein and Dacart and then she would see neither of them again. And maybe they would get shot! This was worth a hope.

Normally she was not that malicious but especially the mage certainly was getting on her nerves.

"Hey", Heidenstein said, when she poured the coffee into her cup. "Can I have some?" Pakhet shrugged. "If you want some. You'll have to clean out that cup, though." She pointed at the cup they had given Winter before and then turned around to Dacart. "Don't have a cup for you, though."

The adept took out a flask. "I'm good."

While Heidenstein went to sink at the wall to wash out the cup, Pakhet sat down on one of the camping chairs and leaned back. She closed her eyes for a moment and tried to calmly breath, tried to relax.

She could hear the doc sitting down, too, but did not open her eyes, until he asked: "This is real coffee?"

"Of course", she said, smirking for a moment. "I don't like the soy-stuff." Then she remembered that she still had his pistole and took it out of her holster. "Here. And thanks. This thing is neat."

He smiled. "I know." For a while he just sipped on his coffee. "Should I get one for you? I can supply you with narcoject. I manufacture it myself."

At this Pakhet once more hesitated. She was not sure what to reply. On one hand she just wanted to get as far away from this group as possible. On the other hand she did not particularly mind Heidenstein, though she was still wary of his "nice guy"-ness. And once again she reminded herself, that it was only reasonable to keep contact with one of the few street docs, who actually knew what they were doing. "Why not?", she finally answered.

"Alright", he said. "I'll call you once I've got it."

Pakhet nodded and took another sip of the strong coffee. "Doc?", she then said.

Questioningly he looked at her.

"Sorry for the outburst before. Those guys just drive me insane."

Heidenstein just gave her a smile.

"Tell me about it!", Dacart exclaimed. "I mean, it is my rep on the line, right?"

This interjection almost had startled her after such a long silence from Dacart. She turned around to him and could not help but smirk a bit.