

Machines

Hamburg in the shadows

Von Alaiya

XX – Failed negotiations

Goober stayed for another day to help remove every RFID chip and every tracker they found in the equipment they had stolen. He offered to help install the equipment in the hospital, but Heidenstein was hesitant to accept it. Pakhet was rather sure that it was not only because of the extra money they would pay, but because he did not want to have any more people inside his hospital. But again she did not say anything but rather helped him – as far as she was able to not having much knowledge about this kind of equipment – to install the stuff.

"By the way, Pakhet", Heidenstein started, when they were taking a break over a cup of coffee.

His tone made her rather sure, she knew what he was going to talk about. She looked up. "Hmm?"

"Have you thought about what I said? About the arms?", he asked.

She did not answer immediately as she was still unsure. Of course she had thought about it – but she still had not gotten to any conclusion. On the one hand it would be nice to have arms of flesh and blood, as a part of her regretted to ever have agreed to getting the cyber-arms, on the other hand she was not quite ready to give up her cyber-guns. Back when she had gotten her flesh-arms removed, she had wanted to prove herself to that fucking ass of a superior on the job she had been working. It had not done her any good in that job and she had ended up in the shadows – but there the arms had saved her life more than once. "Of course I've thought about it", she said. "But I am... Not sure. Maybe..."

He looked at her for a moment. "Well, it is your decision. But just let me say that I think it would be the better thing to do... As I said: I could make it so that your arms would be as strong and as dexterous as the cyber-arms – the only thing you would lose are the guns."

"I know", Pakhet whispered. She knew he meant well and even though she did not say it, she was thankful for it.

Heidenstein gave her a smile. "Okay."

It was the only time he mentioned the arms while they were installing the equipment, leaving her some more time to think, though she just could not come to a conclusion as both reasons seemed equally valid to her. This arms somehow was a part of her shadowrunner identity.

It took them about three more days to properly install all the stuff they had gotten from that Omnitech clinic. Once again she was tempted to ask about why she had not

seen Dr. Anderson, as they were working on his equipment after all, but again she did not. It was enough that she was relatively sure that Heidenstein was Anderson – even though she was not yet quite clear on whether his old appearance was due to stress or some sort of make-up.

They had just finished installing the equipment when Heidenstein once again got a call which he answered in Russian. He went out of the room – as he did all the time when somebody from the Vory called. Normally it meant that he would go somewhere to take care of some injuries. Sometimes it also meant that some beaten up guy would be brought to the street clinic.

Pakhet could not help but notice that this time he was a long time on the phone. Normally those calls would last two minutes at maximum – this time it was almost a quarter of an hour until he came back.

“What is it?”, she asked.

“Well, it seems we have a run”, he replied. “That is if you'll come along.”

Pakhet looked up. Apparently she had made it clear enough that she rather stayed away from the Lobatchewsky as far as possible. “What is it about?”, she asked.

“You remember the entire ordeal with the girls that had been kidnapped?”, he asked and she nodded for a reply. “Well, it turns out that these 'pirates' are bigger of problem than we might have thought. They attacked some of the Lobatchewsky businesses over the last two months – killed several girls in one establishment, killed also several of the young boys working in the gangs... Well, the thing is, the Lobatchewsky tried to make a bargain with some of the gangs neither involved with them or the Likedeelers. Three guys went for a negotiation meeting, in the morning, but they have not returned, nor did they pick-up when they were phoned. Now they asked me whether I could go in with some shadowrunners and find out what has happened.”

Pakhet gave a sigh. She really did not like the Lobatchewskys or the Likedeeler for that matter, but if what Heidenstein said was true, those pirates – whoever they were – might be worse. And in the end this was not about attacking, but about a rescue. “Okay. I'll come along.”

He smiled. “Good. I'll call the others.”

Pakhet nodded, though she was still not sure whether she deemed it a good idea. But then again somehow they had managed to get the equipment from the hospital without any problems, without any kills and without blowing anything up. So maybe she should give the others a chance.

While Heidenstein made the calls she got into her armoured jacket and checked her pistols to make sure there would not be any malfunctions.

“I cannot reach Dacart”, he said once he came back and took care of his own weapons, before they both went down to the back of the hospital.

“Okay, where have they gone missing?”, Pakhet asked while they were waiting for the others to arrive in the front of the hospital.

“A bar in Wandsbeck”, the doc replied. “The bar is considered neutral ground. They met with a gang that calls themselves the Scorpions.”

Living in Wandsbeck Pakhet had at least heard of them. “How cliché...”, she muttered commenting on the name. She never had quite understood why gangs always named themselves after dangerous animals.

“Well, that was what they call themselves”, Heidenstein said with a shrug.

Then a motorcycle pulled up on the parking lot and Pakhet realized that it was Kah Pak, as his tall and slender build was different from Slap and Dacart. So he had finally

gotten himself a vehicle. Well that was worth something.

"I've come as quickly as possible", he said. "The others?"

"Slap isn't there yet", Heidenstein replied. "Dacart isn't coming."

Kah Pak nodded to show that he had understood and waited that Slap arrived – and he did, just a few minutes later in a cab.

He got out, paid the driver and then went over to them. "Dacart?", he asked when he realized that he was missing.

"Won't come", Heidenstein said. "And we should get going."

Pakhet hesitated. "I'd say we take the new cars."

"New cars?", Slap asked.

She pointed at the two Ford Americas they had gotten from Shiawase after returning that data drive to them. Both cars were now parked in the back of the hospital. The cars did not have any additional armouring yet, but they would be less conspicuous than the Jackrabbit and the van.

"Neat", Slap said after taking a quick look at the cars.

She and Heidenstein exchanged gazes and like that they agreed to take both cars. Just in case that they would get into a firefight and one of the cars would fail. It just made sense to have an extra vehicle along.

"Well, let's get going", Pakhet said and went over to her car.

Slap followed her so she took it that he had just decided to drive with her. She did not complain – at least it meant no spirits just popping out in her car.

"Address?", she asked Heidenstein just before getting into her car.

He sent it her in a message together with a request for a direct communication line and so they drove off.

As it was the early afternoon the streets were still quite busy making it a longer drive than usual. Still they arrived in the south of Wandsbeck without any complications and quickly found the bar Heidenstein had been told about. "Zum Klabautermann" said the sign over a door that led into the building's cellar.

They were in an area of Wandsbeck where most of the houses were actually old – really old – as their owners had been lucky when the black flood had come over the city. It was not like with the buildings in Pinneberg, which were only make-believe. No, the buildings were at least a hundred years old – some of them far older.

Here no living soul seemed to be on the street right now: No cars driving by at the moment and no pedestrians on the sidewalks. But as there was no supermarket or anything but the bar around it was maybe not that noteworthy. Yet: Something had Pakhet on edge, even though she could not quite say what it was.

As they did not want to park in front of the bar to raise any suspicions – in case that somebody was still inside – but rather parked at the end of the street and walked about fifty meters to the door of the bar.

"Look", Kah Pak said. He and Heidenstein had gotten out of their car a bit earlier and hence arrived at the bar half a minute before Pakhet and Slap.

The shaman knelt down on the street right in front of the bar. Once Pakhet had reached them she saw what he meant: There were clear car tracks on the asphalt that looked as if somebody had hurried to get away from there.

Kah Pak bent down to sniff at them. "They are pretty fresh."

"Leaving the question who had driven off that hastily", Heidenstein said.

Slap meanwhile had turned towards the door of the bar and checked at it. "It is open", he said. "And it looks as if somebody had broken in."

After taking a close look at the car tracks herself, Pakhet went over to the door. The

lock – it was an old lock instead of a modern mag-lock – was completely bent as if somebody with at least the strength of a troll forced it open. After thinking about it she drew her heavy pistol and waited for Heidenstein to come over, before throwing the door open.

Her gaze swept the room but it was apparent that nobody inside as the room was very small, featuring only four tables and the bar itself, which was made of old wood. But that was not the only thing obvious: There had been a fight going on in here and it did not happen long ago: There were bullet holes in the wall opposite to the door as well as a relatively fresh puddle of blood on the floor.

“Well, shit”, she muttered while scanning the room again for anything remarkable.

“There is a camera”, Slap said and nodded over to the bar.

The bar had apparently gone with the entire Frisian flair that many bars in Hamburg featured: There was an old wooden steering wheel from a ship hanging on the back wall just above the bullet holes and several nautical items lay on the top shelf over the bar just above the bottles of spirits. But between a padded sea gull and parts of an old fishing net, there was a security camera oriented towards the door of the bar.

“Well, let's hope it was filming”, Heidenstein replied.

Pakhet went into the bar and then through the door at the counter as she had seen another door behind it. She wanted to make sure that nobody was here, but after she had checked the mostly empty back room that only featured a table and a few chairs, the small kitchen with an mostly empty fridge and the toilets it was clear that this bar really had been completely deserted.

“So, what do you think?”, Heidenstein asked while Slap was looking for a good spot to jack into the camera.

“I think I better go outside and guard this place”, she replied. “I don't like it one bit.” She could not point on anything specific, but something about this place gave her the creeps. She was sure that it was not because of the fight and the puddle of blood because she had seen many people die before, had found dead bodies in much worse places and never had been creeped because of it. No, something was just off – and she could not say what exactly it was.

When she was outside she leaned against the wall and waited for something to happen. Maybe somebody had summoned a toxic spirit inside. Because those things just left something in the air – some times at least – that was just off-putting.

While she waited she noticed that a HanSec surveillance drone flew by three times, which seemed at least somewhat odd. Had somebody made a call when they heard to shooting? If so HanSec had probably been paid to not come here which would explain the drone, while no other sign of police presence was to be seen.

There was also a total of two cars driving by, but both seemed to be normal middle class wage slave vehicles – both being driven on auto-pilot while the drivers were busy otherwise.

After maybe ten minutes the door of the bar opened again and Heidenstein waved at her to come inside.

Sullenly she went over to the door and turned around, still being somewhat freaked out by the fact that she just could not made out what was responsible for the strange feeling.

“We've got something”, he said and typed something into his commlink.

She realized that he had sent her a message and found a video file attached to it. She opened the file, which was several minutes long, and looked at it. In the beginning of the video two man were sitting at one of the tables and talked about something. As

the video had no audio and was just a simple old with even so much as depth in the picture. The date was two days ago. Then one of the men handed something over to the other one, before they shook hands and one of the men left.

Pakhet played the video in double the speed as she there was no audio to miss anyway.

The next video was from this day, only three hours ago. It showed how three men came inside – one was the man who had paid in the other video. The other man was there, too, let them in and then went outside himself. Pakhet suspected he was the owner of the bar. Then, about a quarter of an hour later – at least according to the time stamp – the door opened again and three other men came in. One of the men that had been there earlier talked to them and they lay their weapons on the counter. They started talking and Pakhet accelerated the pace of the video even more until she got to the point she had been waiting for: The door was busted open and a huge figure came into the room and started shooting. From the side it had to be a troll though the quality of the video was too low to say for certain.

The men all jumped behind the table, but then another huge figure came in. The entire ordeal lasted maybe ten seconds, before a way smaller figure came inside. The figure apparently said something, before the large figures just carried the men out – it was not obvious whether they were dead or alive.

"Hmm", Pakhet just made while watching the video. "This is strange."

Heidenstein nodded. "Something about those trolls seems weird. They don't move natural."

"Yes." She looked at the video again.

"Maybe they are bunrakus", Heidenstein suggested.

Pakhet just nodded again and looked around. Slap was not in the room, while Kah Pak sat on the floor – apparently meditating. "What's with him?"

"He had felt something weird and is trying to find out what it is", Heidenstein explained.

This stroke her as odd, but she did not say anything to it. She had not seen a toxic spirit in the video but maybe it had been something like that. After all some things were just so bad that they left an impression even for the mundane.

Pakhet sat down facing the door and waited for anyone to make a move.

Slap was the first one to show up. He came from the back room and nodded at Pakhet, when he saw her. "He's still out?", he asked looking at Kah Pak.

Heidenstein answered with a nod.

"I wonder why the owner did not show up again", Pakhet muttered.

"Maybe he has heard something and is afraid", the doc replied.

That did not sound too much out of the field, Pakhet had to agree. "Maybe."

Finally after three more minutes Kah Pak opened his eyes and stood up. "I think I found something. It is..." He seemed to be scrambling for the right word. "Weird."

"What is it?", Heidenstein asked.

The shaman stood up and seemed to be collecting himself. "Well, in the astral space there is.... Something. Well, actually it is not. Normally everything has some sort of energy signature. We call it astral signature", he tried to explain. "And here... It is like something had removed parts of the signature. It feels a bit like... A vacuum." He shook his head as if he could not entirely explain it himself.

"Can we use that to track them?", Pakhet asked.

Kah Pak nodded. "I've already tried. If you show me a map I can show you the point where I last have felt them."

Heidenstein was the first who had his commlink at hand. After having pulled a proper map from the matrix, he showed it to the shaman, who did not take long to mark a spot on the map.

"But I am not sure they stayed there", he said. "I think that they moved. I will go into the astral plane to follow them further."

Pakhet nodded.

"Say, Heidenstein", Slap said. "Do you have the number of one of the Lobatchewsky guys missing? I might be able to find the commlink."

At this Heidenstein nodded. "I can give it to you."

"Well, I guess back to the cars then?", Pakhet said with some relief as she just did not like to stay here.

Somehow she ended up driving Kah Pak around this time, while Slap sat into a car with Heidenstein. Pakhet started the car and just took a deep breath of relief once they had left the street behind them.

Looking to her side she saw Kah Pak relaxing and closing his eyes, so he could go back into the astral – at least this was what Pakhet suspected he was doing.

The point on the map he had showed them was in the direction of the port, which was why she drove into the direction of the Elbe. This time she drove in front of Heidenstein and Slap, but something seemed weird, as the other car further and further falling behind before taking a different turn than her.

"Everything alright, Doc?", Pakhet asked over their communication line.

But there was no answer. Well, this was not good. But for the moment she drove on in the hope they would find something. Maybe Heidenstein was looking something up and had put the car on autopilot, which sometimes did not choose the best way.

"I think I know where they are", Kah Pak said scaring her for a moment as she had not noticed that he had woken up.

"Good", Pakhet said. She pointed at the screen of the satnav which thankfully had a normal screen instead of only displaying things in AR. "Can you show me where?"

The elven shaman nodded and took a long look at the screen, before pointing at a block that was almost at the port.

Pakhet knew that area well, as it was not far from where she had once worked. There were several warehouses that belonged to a real estate company renting the warehouses off for companies that needed extra space for only a few months at a time. In some of the warehouses they also just rented off containers to people who were moving. So it was not out of the question that some gang had just rented a warehouse for illegal activity. HanSec had found entire drug kitchens in some of those warehouses.

So she drove to the block Kah Pak had shown her. "Anything else?"

"Well, one other person had also a weird aura", Kah Pak replied. "And when I was at that place there were several living persons inside. I cannot tell though whether the people we are looking for are still alive."

"We'll see about that later", Pakhet muttered.

From where they had been when Kah Pak had awoken it took them exactly seven minutes to get to the place. As she had suspected it was a medium sized compound with a warehouse on it. Pakhet stopped the car and tried again to reach Heidenstein.

"Doc? Doc? What is going on with you?"

She cursed when there was no other reply, suddenly having a bad feeling. Could it be that some hacker had hacked into that car, kidnapping it and driving it of somewhere else? Maybe she should have followed them.

Quickly she opened a map in AR and tried to find the location of Heidenstein's commlink. As they normally shared that kind of information over the communication line she was able to see that the car was parked only a bit from where the car had moved in another direction.

"What is it?", Kah Pak asked.

"I cannot reach Heidenstein", Pakhet replied. Hesitating for a moment she finally decided: "If we don't hear from them for the next five minutes, we drive there and look what has happened."

"Okay", Kah Pak just replied.

She had to admit to get rather nervous while waiting for something to happen. One minute passed, then two minutes, then three. But then she heard something over her ear-piece.

"Pakhet?", Heidenstein's voice asked.

"Yes", she quickly replied. "What is going on? What is happening?"

"Slap and I had just some run in with some... Well, Slap says it was a technomancer in the matrix", he said.

So it was something with the matrix. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, pretty much. We, well, I guess we won the fight, though only because the technomancer disappeared."

Well, that was somewhat weird – and be it just because technomancers were so incredible rare. Since she had started living in the shadows Pakhet had come across only two technomancers and one of them was already dead as being a mancer just shortened one's life expectancy considerably. "Okay. I think we have found where they've brought those men", she finally said. "Can you see where we are?"

"Yep, I can see you", Heidenstein replied. "We'll be there in ten minutes."

"Okay", she confirmed and looked over at Kah Pak.

The young elf seemed to be focused on the warehouse. Maybe he was trying to sense what exactly was inside.

At least Pakhet could tell one thing: The van they had had to be driving was not parked outside of the warehouse, which had not to mean anything as they could have easily brought it inside. She estimated the warehouse to be about forty meters in length and maybe twenty-five meters broad. There was at least one very obvious security camera on a pole next to the gateway leading onto the compound.

A bit more then ten minutes later she could see Heidenstein's car drive by and got out of her own car.

Kah Pak followed her and they met up with Heidenstein and Slap, who had parked behind one of the other warehouses and out of sight from the one Kah Pak had pointed out.

"So, what did you find out?", Slap asked once they had reached them.

"Whoever went into the bar is in that warehouse over there now", Kah Pak said. "I can feel that very clearly. I can see it on the astral plane. There are also people who are injured inside of it. I would have taken a closer look but the entire building is surrounded by a mana barrier meaning I cannot just go inside astraly."

"Say, could one of the weird auras you've felt been a technomancer?", Heidenstein asked.

The shaman considered this for a moment. "Well, yes, one of them maybe. But not the void, the void is something else. Something... That does not quite feel alive."

"Oh fuck...", Heidenstein muttered, making Pakhet raise an eyebrow as he rarely cursed outside a fight. "It could be cyber-zombies", he explained. "Some people..."

Well, if they are too cybered-up something in them just dies and they are more... Like drones. At least from what I know." He looked at Pakhet while he spoke and she thought she understood what he wanted to tell her. Another warning.

"But we don't know whether the guys are inside, right?", Slap asked.

"I am not sure, no", Kah Pak replied.

Pakhet sighed. "Well, we can at least look around and then decide on what we'll do next, right?"

"Sounds good", Heidenstein agreed with a sigh.

Once again divided they walked around the area to see how well the surveillance for the warehouse was. Pakhet spotted three obvious security cameras on the compound: The one next to the gate and two on two opposite corners of the building. If what Kah Pak had said was right, there was also either some sort of spirit or a mage inside.

"What do you have?", Pakhet asked over the audio connection.

"I've got at least three more hidden cameras", Slap replied. "But the back door is suspiciously lightly secured." His voice said the same she was thinking: That smelled like a trap, though she was not sure whether it was for them or the Vory.

"I don't like it", she muttered.

"Well, me neither", Heidenstein and Slap replied almost synchronously.

"Well, at least we can be somewhat sure, where they are, right?", Kah Pak said. "I mean, that is what we were hired for, right?"

"Right", Heidenstein answered faintly.