

Machines

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I – It starts with a bang

It all started with a bang – literally. A bang so loud, that just for a moment it made the city shake. Windows broke, cars stopped and it only took seconds for the sirens of HanseSec to start howling through the streets.

Pakhet, too, had stopped her motorcycle, once she had seen the enormous fireball shooting into the cloudy sky above Harburg. “What the fuck...” she muttered under her breath, knowing very well that both the bang and the fireball originated from an explosion and by the looks of it not a small amount of explosives.

As many others she could not help but wonder, who the hell would blow up that amount of explosives in Harburg. Or even better: Who had gotten his or her hands on that amount of explosives, as prices for explosives were on the rise for months.

But unlike many others she knew somebody who would probably be able to answer those questions. As her curiosity had already kicked in and she had wanted to visit Michael anyway she started the motorcycle again and turned it around.

The woman, who called herself Pakhet once had been named Joanne Snyder, but working in the shadows for seven years that name had become something like a shadow itself. To her it was nothing more than a distant memory.

Seven years ago she would never have believed it, but Pakhet actually enjoyed working in the shadows. In a way it was easier than having a regular job and it was less boring by far. She had not to answer to anyone on the long term and other than in her old life she was actually respected – though not too much. After all she had done her very best to be not known in the shadows. She never wanted to do any of those high profile jobs, that made you money, but were also quite likely to get you killed.

It was one of her personal rules. Those kinds of rules, that every shadowrunner had. Not the general rules in the shadow, like “Geek the mage first” and “Never strike a deal with a dragon”, but her own, personal rules. Part of those were inspired by moral – because even in the shadows she was not content to just forget about moral and ethics – some were inspired by honour, but most of those personal rules were in place because of what she considered as common sense.

Some of those were: “Don't get too close to other runners – it will get you killed” or “Don't trust anyone – it will get you killed” or especially “Never trust Michael – he will get you killed”.

Michael was her fixer and he had made a habit of knowing everything there was to know in this city, that some people called the “Venezia of the North”, while others just called it “another godforsaken hellhole”. Michael was great at his job, but anyone who trusted him was crazy. Pakhet was sure, that Michael would sell out his grandmother, if she would have been still alive, for the right amount of Nuyen. Of course he would sell her out, too, if somebody just offered the right amount of money.

Another reason to keep it low. At least in theory this was to lessen the number of people willing to buy that kind of information.

But in the end Pakhet did not trust Michael. At least not further, than she could throw him – which was seven meters, too be exact, at least if she was angry enough for that. That was exactly, why she had wanted to go see him today anyway. After all it was safer to keep an eye on him.

And so she arrived in the north of Harburg about an hour later. Normally the way took not even half that time, but not surprisingly there had been several blockades on the

streets and bridges towards Harburg.

Michael owned a small gun shop here – mostly selling illegally acquired weapons – but Pakhet found the shop closed, when she parked her motorkycle in front of it. Shrugging she crossed the street, as Michael was living in a run-down apartment building just on the other side of the street.

She took off her helmet, so her fixer could see, it was her. After all he was watching most of the street using cameras. Some might have called it paranoid, but in the sixths world it was probably the most sane thing to do. Especially if one had the habit of making “special friends” the way Michael did.

Out of habit Pakhet stroke her deep red hair back, though it was that short – barely more than a stubble – that it made not much sense.

The plates for the bells mostly were not labelled, but Pakhet knew which bell button to press anyway.

It took only a few seconds, until Michael's voice came through the intercom. “Pakhet?” He sounded annoyed. “Why is it, that you cannot phone before dropping by?”

“For fuck's sake, Micha, let me in”, she growled back.

The buzzer sounded and she entered the building.

This was one of those old buildings that had been build more than 50 years ago. Hence it was not one of those sky high grown living quarters, but was only ten floors high. This was a blessing, as the lift had never worked.

Michael's two rooms apartment was on the third floor on the side facing the street. This way he could keep an eye on his shop, even when he was not there. And generally Michael was either in the shop or at home.

The door to his apartment was shut, but Pakhet knew, that she just needed to knock. Soon the door opened. Michael smiled at her in his own, almost-not-fake way. “As I said, you could phone.” He let her in.

Michael was a human man, from all she knew almost 40 years old. But his brown hair was – dyed or not – still without any white streaks. As always he wore more elegant clothing, though she knew for a fact that it was armoured and able to withstand most bullets – at least the smaller calibres.

“I could, if I wanted to”, Pakhet replied. She waited, until the door was closed again, before she asked: “So, what do you know about the explosion?”

“What explosion?” He did his best to look innocent and failed horribly at it.

Pakhet rolled her eyes. “You know exactly what explosion.”

Michael only shrugged and went back to his desk, which was clustered with computer screens and holograms. “Yeah, but you know how it is: Information costs.”

“And you know, that you still owe me for the last disaster”, she growled, before sitting down on the old sofa standing in the middle of the room. She did not take off the armoured jacket, she was wearing – as stated before: She did not trust Michael. It was bad enough, that she could not properly wear the helmet inside.

“What disaster?”, Michael replied without looking up from the screens.

“Don't fool with me, Micha.” Pakhet gave him an annoyed gaze, though it went unnoticed.

“Alright, alright.” The man gave a defeated sigh. “But I don't have all the information and even if I had: Some parts would cost extra. Okay?”

“Start, please”, barked Pakhet.

“Well, the explosion was probably caused by explosives stolen only a few days ago. Gelignite that was stolen from one of the bigger construction companies on an transport from the port. They stole about 600 pounds.”

Pakhet lifted an eyebrow. "600 pounds?"

"Yes. At least according to my information."

"Who are 'they'?", Pakhet asked, when Michael did not continue.

"A smaller Go Gang from Harburg. Call themselves the Iron Raiders. I have heard some rumors that their boss is some sort of Toxic Shaman, but I am not sure, whether those are true."

Well, while there were some toxic shamans and mages who liked blowing stuff up, they normally did not use explosives for that. So one question remained: "So, why did the stuff blow up?"

Michael shrugged. "I don't know, yet. And even if, that information would not be free."

"Yeah." Pakhet sighed dramatically. "Of course it does." For a moment she paused. When Michael did make no move to continue, she added: "So that is all you can or will tell me?"

"Yep", he replied, concentrating on one of his screens. "Anything else you want to know?"

She looked at him, even though he did not seem to notice. "Nope."

"Looking for a job, maybe?"

"Maybe." She shrugged. "You know my rules." Of course he knew the rules, most importantly, that she would – under no circumstances – do any sort of wetwork for anybody.

"Yes, yes." Michael's eyes were scanning the top right screen. "I might have something for you later on. But there is something I need to take care of first. As I said: You should call, before you come here."

"Whatever", Pakhet murmured and took up her helmet. "So that means, you are going to phone me later on?"

"Probably..." Michael did not look up. "You don't have anything to do, right?"

"Who know's", she replied and went to the door. She had actually hoped that Michael would know more about what had happened. But than again, it did not concern herself, whoever blew up... Well, whatever they had blown up. "I'll be going."

"Sure, bye."

"You're too kind", Pakhet grunted, while opening the door. "See you later."

When she left the building, she looked south, where still a large column of smoke rose towards the bleak sky. She was still curious, what the meaning of this was. After all, there was a story behind every big explosion, right? And be it just a dumb ork, that was just not careful enough...

After all she really had nothing to do for the rest of the day. So she ended up driving back to Wandsbeck, where she had rented a small house. As she had already guessed, half of the DeMeKo channels were talking about the explosion. Somebody apparently had already decided, that this was indeed a terrorist attack, so most of the news were speculating which organisation was to blame for it. Maybe the ork Underground? Maybe the Huminis? Maybe GreenWar? Different specialists were talking to different reporters and of course nobody said anything about stolen explosives or a small go gang.

It was just before 6pm – Pakhet just had made herself coffee (real coffee, mind you, no fake soykaf) – when her Comlink started buzzing. A look at the screen told her, it was Michael.

"So, you have a job for me?", she asked, while turning down the trideo volume.

"Good evening", he replied in a chiding manner. "And yes, I do have a job. And I think,

you will love it. You owe me for this one.”
Pakhet rolled her eyes. “I am all ears.”

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 reinforkements?” 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 reinforkements, 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.

"Baramus, 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 – "were 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?", Baramesus 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.

III – Easy solutions

It was shortly after 9pm, when the truck arrived at a street a few blocks away from the save-house. Pakhet had figured, that parking the truck in front of the bungalow-like building would draw too much attention, and thankfully Dacart had agreed.

So while the later was guarding the vehicle – and probably arguing with its auto pilot – Pakhet drove the Jack Rabbit back to the save-house. While she was well able to defend herself, she really was not keen on testing those skills against an entire gang of youngsters.

Once again she rang the doorbell and was left in – this time by Murphy.

“The truck is set”, she just said, while going back to the kitchen. “So we can get this over with.” She looked around for the pistols she had left on the table. “Where are my weapons?”

Nobody replied, but she spotted the weapons in the kitchen sink anyway, though they seemed to be somehow immaterial, almost see-through. Pakhet reached out for them. They felt normal at least.

It was then she realized, that this had to be some sort of invisibility magic. “Don't ever do magic to my stuff, without asking me first”, she growled, looking at the shaman and the other mage. “Whoever did that: Never. Try. That. Again.”

“Well, I thought this would help to hide the explosives”, Baramaus replied boldly.

“Well, it doesn't.” Without further ado, she put the pistols back into their holsters, checking the security first.

“What do you need those for anyway?” The mage asked.

“For shooting things”, she replied sarcastically. “Decker, err, Slap, Doc” – she had already decided that the name “Doctor Heidenstein” was just too long – “the truck is parked a few streets away. Let's get this over with.”

It was once again Baramaus, who objected: “There is no way, I am staying behind.”

Looking over to Herr Schmidt, Pakhet was waiting for him to say something. When he just nodded, she shrugged. “Whatever...”

And so they ended up in a quite overcrowded driver's cabin, with Pakhet being rather glad, that none of the others were an ork or even a troll, because in that case they would have never all fitted.

“So, where are we going?”, Pakhet asked, looking at Heidenstein.

He gave an address, right at the border of Harburg and Wandsbeck and the auto-pilot loaded route, before reminding the passengers to buckle up.

According to the navigation system, the address was associated with a hospital – while it made sense with a medic, she had to wonder, whether they could just go and get some equipment from there. When she was still working as a security guard, she would have never been allowed to just take one of the armoured vests for private use.

Apart from that, she also could not help but wondering, whether – if this guy really worked there, he would be really so careless to just reveal a part of his identity. Then again, it was not her problem. So she shrugged it off.

“Hey, you, Pakhet.” It was Dacart leaning over to her with his comlink in hand. “Watch this.”

Man, that dude had a serious need for affection. “What is it?”, she asked not hiding her annoyance.

"Me negotiating with a toxic spirit!" He grinned.

Pakhet gave a long sigh, already guessing, that he would not let it go. So she looked at the screen. What she saw seemingly was a video record done with glasses or a helmet camera. Whoever wore the glasses – it probably was Dacart – was running in a dark environment. She knew it had to be the sewers.

Somebody else was there too. While it was hard to see in the infrared video, it seemed to be an ork. The two of them were getting around a corner, when something huge started to rise out of the slop before them. It took not long for a mostly formless blob to form and block the path.

The ork and the guy recording – Dacart – tried to run through the tunnel at the sides of the spirit, but it threw them back into a slop. They tried again, but to no avail.

The spirit seemed to ready itself for attack, when a voice – clearly Dacart's – screamed: "Can't we just talk about it?"

Surprisingly the spirit held off its attack. "What do you want?", it asked in a deep voice.

"We just want to pass through", Dacart replied desperately.

For a moment the spirit hesitated. "What will you give me for letting you pass?"

Some hesitation. Then the view shifted downwards where hands grabbed a grenade from a belt. "I have this nice grenade with toxic gas. Would you like to have it?"

The spirit took some time to contemplate. Then a sloppy tentacle came out of the blob and grabbed the grenade. "Get out of here", the spirit growled and moved aside.

"Thanks!", Dacart's voice replied before he ran on.

The video was stopped and the real Dacart grinned at Pakhet. "See? Wasn't that awesome?!"

"Yeah, great", Pakhet replied dryly wondering whether he did not realize, that this would hurt his image more than anything. But again, this was not her problem, so she shrugged it off.

Dacart though seemed to be enormously proud of this accomplishment.

Well, if he showed stuff like this around, he would see where it would get him.

Thankfully the truck stopped soon and once again there were lucky enough to not get controlled – especially considering, that they had the explosives with them.

But now the truck parked on a mostly empty parking lot in front of a smaller, five story hospital building. The sign above the entryway declared the hospital to be the "Anderson Hospital" though Pakhet had never heard of it. Considering the empty parking slot and the probable lack of patients it was not quite surprising, though. There seemed to be no lights burning over the third story purporting that the hospital was mostly empty.

"I will need help carrying some of the equipment", Doctor Heidenstein said upon getting out of the passengers cabin.

"No problem", Pakhet replied happy to get out of the stink surrounding Dacart.

The adept though also volunteered: "I can help, too."

"Yeah, you stunk in a hospital?" Pakhet lifted an eyebrow. "I don't think so." She looked at the elf – Kah Pak – who seemed to be mostly silent. "Can you help?"

"I think so", he replied and also got out of the car.

"I will take care of the on-board console while you are gone", chrome-head said.

"Good", Pakhet said with a sigh, then she followed Heidenstein to the building. She kept an eye on their surroundings – after all hospitals, especially in the shadows, where not always as safe as one would wish.

The guards in the entrance hall seemed a bit shady to her, but she could not quite say

why. At least her suspicion about the state of the institution seemed to be validated by the empty entrance hall. There was a human woman at the front desk, but she seemed to be rather bored, though she shortly looked up from whatever she was doing and nodded at Heidenstein.

It was pretty clear that he was rather on edge, when he turned around to them. "Wait here for a moment. I need to talk with somebody about the equipment."

Pakhet raised an eyebrow, but only replied: "Sure" while Kah Pak only nodded.

Waiting for Heidenstein to return Pakhet leaned against the wall across the front desk closely watching the the guards as well as the front lady, just in case anybody tried something funny. But nothing happened and it took the doc about five minutes to come return.

He was accompanied by an ork wearing the same formal clothing as the two guards.

"We can take the equipment", Heidenstein just said.

"And who is that?", Pakhet asked nodding at the ork.

"Somebody to help us carry", the medic replied.

Knowing that it was all he would say Pakhet shrugged and waited for Heidenstein to lead the way. Still she kept an eye on the ork as all of this seemed a bit shady to her.

But once again nothing happened. They went to the second floor of the hospital and into a corridor off-limits of patients where Heidenstein lead them to a laboratory that indeed housed quite a bit of chemical equipment.

"Is there anything special we need or don't need?", Heidenstein asked.

Pakhet hesitated for a moment. After all she was not a specialist when it came to the things they were planning. Especially considering that while she had worked with explosives before, she had rarely used professional equipment. "Well, we won't need distillery dishes", she said half joking.

For a moment the doc smiled. "Oh, really?", he replied dryly.

Thankfully Heidenstein seemed to have a general idea of what they needed, while Pakhet herself could at least say quite well what they would not need, so it only took them a couple of minutes to sort out what they would need. They packed the equipment in boxes and soon were on their way out of the hospital.

"You took long", Dacart complained once they reached the truck.

Nobody bothered to reply to him, when they opened the tailift of the truck to put down the boxes. They had the equipment but something was still missing.

"We still need a table or something else to work on", Pakhet remarked.

"And a lamp", the doc added. "I don't think the overhead will cut it." He sighed. "But I think we can take it from one of the unused laboratories."

Once again Pakhet just shrugged. "Alright. Should I help carry?"

After a short moment of hesitation Heidenstein nodded. "Yeah. It would be a great help."

So he, Pakhet and the ork without a name returned back into the building to get a proper table, chairs and a lamp from the hospital. And while she did not say anything, Pakhet had to wonder, why Heidenstein would just be allowed to get all of this out the hospital. Was he paying whoever owned it to allow him – after all the hospital would be in dire need of money with the lack of patients – or was there another reason?

But again, it did not concern her and so she did not ask any questions.

It took about twenty more minutes until they finally had everything they needed in the cargo area of the truck. They had not yet set up the equipment to prevent

damage on the ride as without even talking everyone seemed to understand that they could not do what they were planning on the ride.

"So, what now?", Heidenstein asked. "We cannot park the truck here while working."

Pakhet gave a sigh. "Wasn't planning on it." In her mind she considering where they could park the truck while working. She preferred somewhere without many people around – just in case something went wrong.

"Can't we get something to eat first?", Dacart, who was still sitting in the driver's cabin, complained. "I am hungry."

Pakhet wanted to object, but Heidenstein cut her off before she could even start.

"That actually is not a bad idea", he said.

Not sure whether she should get angry she looked at him. "Huh?"

"I know a parking lot mostly used by drug dealers up in Kaltenkirchen. It's also near to one of those fast food restaurants", he explained quickly. "That probably would help in both accounts."

Once again Pakhet almost smiled. So here was actually somebody who also tried to keep the risk for bystanders down, eh? Again she did not say anything, but acknowledged it silently, as it was a rarer virtue then she would have wished for.

Happy to not have to sit in the driver's cabin again she chose to stay in the cargo area. Yes, it was generally not allowed, but if they were to be controlled by HanSec they would be fucked either way, considering that they were taking explosives associated with a terrorist attack for a ride.

She was not really surprised to see Heidenstein, Baramesus and Kah Pak joining her, so that only Dacart and chrome-head remained in the driver's cabin. She did not know whether chrome-head had no sense of smell, had some smell-filter or just wanted to do his job, keeping an eye on the console, but she did not mind either way.

Thankfully the auto-pilot had a rather smooth way of driving, so that they had not to worry about the equipment being thrown around the cargo area.

Pakhet had to admit, that she had imagined the group responsible for that explosives to be more fun. Well, maybe it was because the actual culprit – at least if Dacart did not lie about it – had already taken to his heels, leaving only Dacart as the no so proverbial fool, but still she was pretty sure, that this was to be a rather easy solution. She watched Kah Pak and had to wonder, what his deal was. It kinda felt like all of this did not concern him. While she was pretty sure, that she could not stand the other mage (apart from also wondering, why he was even here), she was not quite sure where to place the elf.

After a while the silence got on her nerves. "That hospital of your's", she finally started addressing Heidenstein, "is it a street clinic?"

The doc, who seemingly had been reading something in AR – he seemed to have Cybereyes as well, even though he apparently had made an effort to obscure this, other than her or chrome-head – looked up. "Part of it is", he answered.

"What kind of street clinic?", she asked.

For a moment he hesitated with a reply. "The honourable kind, I hope", he finally replied.

Pakhet smirked. "So no chop shop?"

"I hope not", he said with emphasis, as if this question had insulted him.

"Good to know", she replied with a shrug.

He eyes her with apparently a bit of suspicion. "Why?"

"It is just useful to know more then one street clinic. For more then one reason."

"Sure", Heidenstein just replied.

Once again they fell silent, so that it was a relief to Pakhet when the truck came to a stand still and somebody knocked against the side of the truck.

Somebody opened the loading ramp.

"You guys alright back there?", Dacart asked.

Pakhet got up and went towards the ramp, to look around at the parking lot where they had hopefully arrived. Indeed they found themselves on a parking lot that was apparently designed to offer pitches for quite a few cars. Considering that it seemed to be mostly empty it was surprising nobody had used the space to put houses on it. But right now it was exactly what they needed and indeed – just as Heidenstein had said – there was the golden sign of McDonald's glowing not too far away.

Dacart stretched. "I will get something to eat. Anything I should bring?"

With a sigh Pakhet got out a cred stick topped up with 100 Nuyen. "Here. Get a menu for everyone or something."

The adept's face creased into a smile. "Thanks. You are not so bad, you know?"

She could not help but to roll her eyes. "Just go, okay?" After all money really had not been a problem for her. While she already knew, that this run would barely pay anything, that was not true for the runs she normally did. When Dacart turned around to run over to the fast food restaurant, she turned to face the other, who mostly had come out of the truck by now. Only Kah Pak was still standing in the opening at the back of the cargo area.

"Doc, can we get started?", she asked. "I want to get over with this soon", she added under her breath.

"Sure", he just replied and followed her back into the truck.

In silence they started to properly assemble the equipment on the table, before taking only a bit of the explosives.

"Do you have anything to scan of active IDs?", Pakhet asked, when they were done with the assembly.

Heidenstein shook his head. "Nothing particular. But ask Slap. His deck should be able to pick things up, right?"

"He should be, yes", sighed Pakhet. While she was unable to put her finger on it, there was something about chrome-head, that she found utterly unlikeable. Still she got up to ask the decker. After all she had not to like him for him to do his job.

Just when she jumped out of the cargo area she saw Dacart running over towards the truck. He stopped right in front of her, while she was going over to the driver's cabin where Slap was apparently still sitting.

Dacart held up a big, nidorous bag. "Here. Also, here. There is still some money on it." He handed her back the cred stick.

"Thanks." A bit surprised she took the cred stick. She would have thought that even if he did not spend all the money he would keep the rest. But it seemed that while being a fool, he was at least a somewhat honest fool. Well, as honest as professional criminals got.

She knocked against the door of the driver's cabin. "Hey, Slap, there is food and we might need your help back there for a moment."

The door was half opened and opened completely the next moment. "Very well", he said and seemed not to be too happy about it. He sighed, when he saw the McDonald's bag. "Well, you can call it food, I guess."

"With flavoured soy stuff, where is the difference?" Dacart took one smaller paper bag out of the plastic bag and picked a burger out of it. With that he sat down on the concrete floor and started to eat.

"It is still soy stuff", Slap muttered but got himself a paper bag, too.

Without much appetite, as she did not like the fatty soy food, she took one of the burgers herself and sat down on the ramp to eat, while most of the others seemed very hungry. They probably had not eaten in a while, but it also meant that they could not continue until they were done. Then again she reasoned with herself that she rather had a non hypoglycaemic doc helping her with the explosives. After all while they had equipment the equipment was not meant for what they were doing with it. Not to mention, that the cargo area was far from being a proper laboratory.

So she waited for him and chrome-head to finish eating, so they could help. When Slap finally came around to the cargo area she sighed with relief.

"Can you just check for the ID?", she asked.

"Of course", the decker said and lifted his metal arm in front of the explosives, that was now laying on the table.

Pakhet could not see a deck, so she had to assume, that his deck was somehow integrated into the chrome-arm. She knew that it was possible and as she knew how expensive cyberdecks tended to be, it seemed to be quite reasonable.

After a few seconds Slap looked up. "The things have a signature. It is encoded. I could probably somehow overwrite it, but from what I know those things need to use a certain encode."

"Also, we don't yet know about any chemical trails", Pakhet added. It would have surprised her, if the explosives had not been ID'd.

"Exactly", said the chrome-head.

"Well, I guess, we will have to find out." She turned towards Heidenstein. "So we should get started."

He nodded. "Yes, we should."

"Good." Pakhet turned the desk lamp they had taken from the hospital on and had her comlink display a list of the most common chemicals used for chemical trails in plastic explosives at the right side of her field of vision.

She noticed, that Heidenstein sat down besides her.

"I have a list with chemicals that are used for this", she said showing her comlink. "I know how to handle explosives, you know chemistry. So I would take that you know how to identify this chemicals?"

"I would think so", Heidenstein replied with a smirk. "Would you mind sending me the list?"

Hesitating at first she nodded. "Sure." She suppressed her number. "Number?"

He gave her a number and she had to wonder whether it was his actual number or a metalink wired to relay all messages. At least his comlink vibrated not a second later and from what she could say he did the same she had done and displayed the list in AR.

Finally they got to work. It became apparent very quickly they were dealing with high rated explosives – no wonder Herr Schmidt or whoever was behind him wanted to get his hands on the stuff. But obviously the explosives were accordingly ID'd in every possible way. The ID tags were micro tags, making it practically impossible to remove without the right equipment. Instead of one chemical trail the stuff used at least two different ones. Apart from that there was one more problem for the use of these explosives: It was designed to be ignited with the help of micro-chips with a special signal or something similar.

At least they worked rather quickly. Pakhet saw with a relief, that Heidenstein really did knew what he was doing and worked determined and focussed. Still it took them

about two hours to go through all of the common chemical trails, so that they did not finish before midnight.

"Well, this is not good", she muttered to herself, looking at the notes they had taken. By now she felt rather tired. In a way working on the explosives was more exhausting than an hour of extensive fighting.

"We should talk to the others", Heidenstein said. Somehow he looked less tired and Pakhet envied him for that.

"You do that", she replied and got out her comlink. "I make a call."

He raised an eyebrow. "What kind of call?"

"My fixer. We will need somebody to clean this stuff up, if we don't want to break into HanSec headquarters."

Once again he gave one of those short smirks. "True. But we need to talk to Herr Schmidt before getting someone else involved."

"Yeah. But I would prefer naming him a price", she replied.

"Well, then do it your way", he said. "Just don't be too precise."

She rolled her eyes. "This is not the first time I am doing this kind of stuff, you know?"

"Sure", he said and opened the ramp, to talk to the others.

Though she was pretty sure Michael was already asleep, she speed dialled his number. She was not surprised that it took him a few seconds to get onto the line and did so with an audible yawn.

"You know what time it is?", he said and his tired face appeared on the screen.

"Sure I do", she replied annoyed. "But I need something and I am rather sure you can deliver."

"Huh?" It seemed to take him a few seconds to understand what she was saying. "You know that it will cost extra for waking me up."

"In this case not my problem. Listen: I need somebody who can clean out and retag explosives. A specialist. I am sure you know at least one person able to, right?"

After a moment a smug grin appeared on his face. "So I was right."

"I might tell you later", she said. "So you know somebody?"

He hesitated for a moment. "I do know somebody. I am not sure whether I can reach him at this time. I will write you. Just a moment."

"Hurry, alright?", she urged him, before ending the call without even so much as saying good-bye.

Then she got up. After all she realized that she should at least tell the others what she was going to do – even though she was going to do it no matter what any of them said.

"So you want to hire someone else?", chrome-head asked, just when she jumped out of the cargo area.

"Basically like that", Pakhet sighed and looked over to the doc. He already had told them, eh?

"So you cannot get that stuff out yourself?", Baramesus asked his arms crossed.

"No I cannot", she barked at him. "But other than you I am good for something."

The mage just shrugged. "We can still just break into some HanSec station, right?"

"Right. Great idea." Her voice was gushing with sarcasm.

"I would rather not break into any HanSec station", Kah Pak said quietly.

"I'll have to second that", Heidenstein said. "I think hiring somebody to clean up the explosives is still more efficient than trying anything..." For a moment he hesitated. "Stupid."

Chrome-head gave a long sigh. "Technically I agree, but we are not getting a lot of

money for this either way, now that it is already divided by six."

"And I really need money", Dacart muttered.

Baramus once again stepped up to them. "I would not mind getting at least something out of this."

Pakhet snorted. "You don't complain. You are basically getting money for sitting around." With anger she looked around. "So, do you prefer to attack the next HanSec station? If so, be my guest, but don't count on me accompanying you!"

"I thought you were muscle", Baramus muttered.

She flashed at him. "I am muscle, but I am not stupid and more than that: I am not suicidal." Still she was holding her comlink in the hand. "I mean it is your call. Those of you, who want to do something stupid are welcome, too. I will call Herr Schmidt, when you are locked up." Of course she was bluffing as she knew it would make for bad rep to let the bunch of them run into their own demise.

There was silence for a moment and just as she thought nobody was jumping to run to the next HanSec station.

As – after a full minute – nobody had said anything, she got out the number she had gotten from Herr Schmidt. Thankfully Michael had replied, too. 5000. Well, it was much, but it was the decision Herr Schmidt would have to make. "I gather, I can call Herr Schmidt now, right?"

Nobody objected.

IV – Support

With a sigh Pakhet looked at the clock on her comlink. It was already after 3am. Great. She had to get involved with those fools, eh? She cursed her own curiosity, while she once again sat in the cargo area of the truck.

At least they had gotten the explosives cleaned out and newly ID'd. And she had gotten to drink a few soycaf, thanks to which she felt at least somewhat alive. Still she could not help but looking forward to get over with this run. All she wanted right now was a shower, her bed and real coffee. Maybe not in that order, but still: Those three things took priority right now.

Accordingly she was rather glad when the truck finally stopped and the motor was turned off. "Finally", she muttered, while getting up and opening the ramp.

They were back in Harburg where they had agreed to meet Herr Schmidt again. And of course she had to get the Jack Rabbit back before she could go home.

Thankfully either Dacart or chrome-head had remembered to park a block away from the save-house again. Pakhet got the explosives, which were wrapped in thin plastic foil right now and could not help but give a relieved sigh.

"Let's get this over with." She jumped down onto the cracked asphalt.

Heidenstein landed beside her. "You seem to be utterly keen on getting rid of us."

"You think?", she replied.

The doc did not say anything, while they waited for Baramesus and Kah Pak to get out of the cargo hold. When they finally were out and the truck was locked, they made their way back to the save-house.

This time the door opened rather quickly and Herr Schmidt himself was facing them. "You are finally back", he said with a worn-out smile and let them in. Once all of them had gone into the kitchen, he closed the front door and followed them. "So, everything went well?"

"Yes", Pakhet replied and handed him the small package. "This are the explosives. The chemical trail has been removed and the IDs exchanged."

"Thank you", Schmidt said while eyeing at the package. Then with a sigh he went into one of the other rooms – apparently to pack the explosives away.

Nobody said anything until he came back looking pretty much as tired as Pakhet still felt. "Well, thankfully this was a solution", he said. He got out a couple of credsticks from his pocket. "This is your payment." With another sigh he said back down. Then he shoved one of the credsticks over to Pakhet. "This should cover the expenses."

She nodded and took the stick to check it with her comlink. Indeed it was loaded with about 8500 Nuyen, which covered all the money she had advanced with an additional 3000. She gave a sigh and then posted 6500 to one of her accounts before handing back the stick. After all she had not done much and she pitied Herr Schmidt a bit. With all the stuff that had been messed up on this run he was probably going get into trouble because of it and because of the additional costs that had followed. "It's alright", she just said. "I did not do much."

Herr Schmidt looked at her for a moment and it seemed as if he was to protect.

"It is okay", Pakhet repeated insistently.

Still Schmidt hesitated a while but finally took back the credstick without saying anything.

It was apparently then that Dacart realized what it meant and objected. "You cannot

give money back! What about the van?"

Pakhet raised an eyebrow in confusion. "What van?"

"We wanted to buy a van for the team!", he exclaimed.

"What team?"

Dacart looked at her clearly hurt. "Well, all of us!"

At that Pakhet only snorted. "We are no team. We are a bunch of runners, who just worked on the same run. That does not make us a team."

Herr Schmidt gave a rather audible sigh. "Indeed." He looked over at them. "But technically you were supposed to be a team. The others know that. This was originally not meant to be a single run. I am sorry I did not make that clear before." Another sigh. "Well, to make it short: This entire ordeal is in preparation for another run that is planned to happen in a few month. Originally I planned to send all of you on different missions to gather certain items that will be needed for the 'big run'. But I guess that won't be that easy after that rucus caused by certain people."

Sceptically Pakhet eyed at him. "So, what is this 'big run' going to be?"

"I cannot tell you yet", Herr Schmidt replied.

"No." Pakhet shook her head. "I am very sorry, but that is not what I signed up for. I am doing this for a couple of years now. I am a professional shadowrunner. I am not going to babysit a bunch of idiots just for them to still be alive for any mysterious 'big run'. I really am sorry, but I don't want to have anything to do with that."

"Who are you calling idiots?" Baramus stood up to protest.

"Exactly! I am not an idiot!", Dacart agreed.

Pakhet just shook her head not acknowledge them with an answer. "I am sorry, Herr Schmidt."

Instead of saying something, Schmidt just nodded at her but looked even more tired.

"But what about the van?", Dacart asked once more.

For a moment Pakhet thought about just ignoring him. Then again he was still young and after all it was not really his fault, that he was a fool. So she turned around to him.

"It is not my problem."

Like a whipped cur he looked back at her. It seemed that at least he really wanted to be part of a team. But he probably did not work in the shadows for long, so maybe he really believed in those idealized shadowrunner myth from certain trideo-shows. After all runners in trideo shows were either ruthless or idealistic idiots. The later kind always worked for the corp financing the series.

Pakhet gave a sigh. "Alright. You know what? I can offer you one thing: You buy a cheap, used van, I vamp it up for a bargain price. But that's it, okay? I am not going to babysit you for the next month. I'll just help with that van."

"We wanted to buy a used van either way", chrome-head said and something in his voice hinted, that he too was hurt about the "idiots" from before.

"Well then, great", she said sardonically.

"And we'll need your number", chrome-head then added.

She sighed. This really was the last thing she wanted. As well as every shadowrunner worth his salt she had an entire collection of cheap metalinks for this kind of endeavour. Still she somehow had the feeling that she would regret it giving any of them her number. "Alright", she finally agreed. "I will give the doc my number." This seemed to be the most reasonable – especially as it was never a bad idea to add a street doc to one's contacts.

The next day Pakhet had almost forgotten about the promise she had made about

helping to vamp up a certain van. She had slept until noon, had enjoyed real coffee for breakfast (only real coffee) and then had went out to the gun range she frequented. While she did not think too much about the rather easy run from the day before she still felt somewhat angry and shooting always helped her to clear her head and cool her emotions down.

The last thing she needed was her emotions getting in her way on the next real run. Because most of the times the solutions did require a lot of shooting and running. Being distracted often resulted in death. She had seen others die that way and it was certainly not the way she was going to go.

Maybe the reason she was still angry was that there was still a terror warning for the entire city and knowing how the same had played out the last time, she knew that running would get harder for the next month or two.

Still she felt better after an hour of target shooting, which was when Michael called her.

Taking a long, deep breath she lowered the pistol and went out of the shooting hall, to answer the call. Being the annoying bastard he was Michael of course did not hang up to wait for her to call back. Instead she saw his name blinking up at the side of her field of vision for two entire minutes and would have been annoyed with the ring tone, too, if she had not muted it.

"What is it, Micha?", she barked once she answered the call.

"It seems you are in your best mood again", was the prompt answer. "Great. I am still waiting for a certain information."

"Then wait", she replied.

Michael gave a melodramatic sigh. "You are not going to tell your best fixer?"

"Why would I?"

"I might pay you", he offered. "Not much. But I am still intrigued."

Pakhet sighed. After the last real run she had gone too had been pretty much a disaster – mostly due too misinformation – and she had declined most of her payment yesterday she was still short on money. Also it was not as if she had anything else to do. "Alright. I'll come over. But make sure to have some coffee ready."

Michael laughed. "Alright."

"So much for this", Pakhet muttered to herself, while putting her gun bag into its holster and making sure it sat safe. Well, she tried to cheer herself up, at least it gave her a way to check in on Michael again – as there was still the trust issue they had.

Soon she was back on her motorcycle and on her way towards Harburg. On the way she was once again saw several police blockades. What a waste of time, she thought, considering that the explosion had nothing to do with terrorism. Then again: Maybe HanSec knew that as well and still used the opportunity to sort out runners (as well as other people with fake SIDs).

When she finally arrived in front of Michael's shop she found it open. With a sigh she parked the motorcycle and went inside.

"Michael?", she asked into the apparent emptiness of the shop.

"Back here", his voice replied from the backroom. "Doing some inventory." The door behind the counter opened with Michael waving out of it. "Come in."

Instead of taking the long way around Pakhet just jumped over the counter. "How much?" She entered the room.

Other than the shop, which was mostly held in different shades of green (after all it was officially a shop for hunting-equipment), the backroom was mostly white and rather barren. Michael was sitting on a table and with ammunition magazines lying in

front of him.

"We will see", Michael replied to her question.

"Alright", she said with a sigh. "Coffee?"

Instead of answering Michael just pointed to a coffee machine on a table right in the back of the shop. "There."

Pakhet took herself an already cracked cup and filled it with coffee, before sitting down on the other side of the table. "Alright. To make it short: You were right. It has been a bunch of runners who blew the stuff up. And yes, they wanted to steal some of it. The Johnson wasn't particularly happy with them because of it. They managed to steal some, but basically alerted HanSec, HAZMAT and who knows whom else. Apparently they should steal the stuff for something bigger, but that's all I know about it. And the guy responsible for blowing it up has already taken his heels to his hands. He has left the mission and – if he has some sense in him – probably the city."

"What's his name?", Michael asked while taking some notes in AR.

Pakhet just shrugged. "Dunno. Have not met him. He was already gone when I got there."

For a moment Michael studied her face. "And the others?"

"You know I cannot tell you."

"Not even for money?", he asked.

"Not even for money", she replied. "Bad rep. They are a bunch of idiots, but I won't sell them out. You know that."

Now it was Michael who shrugged. "Too bad."

"So: How much?", she asked.

"I already knew most of that." He crossed his arms and looked her in the eye.

She did not evade his gaze. "So?"

"50", he offered.

"200", she replied.

"Don't joke around."

"I am not."

"That's not what that information is worth."

She snorted. "Right. It is compensation for the headache it caused me."

"100", he replied.

"Deal."

"I'll send it over", he said in his best business voice.

"Great." She got out her comlink to see whether he was true to his word, just to see that she had gotten a new mail. Too late she remembered that she had disabled the display for the gun range and opened the mail.

It was a message from Heidenstein, sent about 20 minutes ago: "Have the van. Were should I bring it?"

Now Pakhet remembered what she had forgotten. Quickly she made sure that Michael had sent the money, then she emptied her cup and stood up. "I have to go."

"Already?", Michael replied.

"Admit it: You are happy I go", she just said.

He grinned and shrugged. "Take care."

"Sure." She left the shop while already dialling the number of somebody else. Robert. Robert Schneider was the only person in the world Pakhet really considered her friend – and while she did not admit it also the person thanks to whom she had not gone completely insane. She knew him since they had been children and they had been friends for years even before she had ended up in the shadows of Hamburg. Also

Robert had what she needed right now: He owned a small autoshop in Wandsbeck including a couple of garages.

He picked up just after two rings.

"Jo!", he greeted her.

"Get my name straight", she sighed.

"Sure", he said, a bit cooler now. "Pakhet."

While Pakhet still did consider Robert her best friend, he never approved of her work in the shadows and always talked to her, as if she was still Joanne – somebody she most certainly was not anymore.

"Is everything alright?", he then asked.

"Yeah", she said – though her voice did say something else. "Everything is fine. With you?"

"Everything is great", he replied and she could hear a smile in his voice. "What's up? Why are you calling."

She smiled a bit, while putting on her helmet once more. "I have to ask for a favour."

"Has it anything to do with a shadowrun?", he asked cautiously.

"Indirectly", she replied. For a moment she was silent thinking about what best to tell Robert, then she explained: "See, some poor chummers asked me to vamp up their car. I would need one of your garages."

Robert hesitated for a moment. "Some chummers, eh?"

"Yep." Pakhet started the motorcycle. Thankfully she had fitted the helmet with a micro, allowing her to keep the line. "I'll tell them that I rented the garage."

Again there was some silence, until Robert finally replied: "Alright."

Pakhet smiled. She had known she could count on Robert with that. "Thank you. Is it alright if I tell one of them to drop the van off?"

"Sure." Robert did his best to sound unworried, but she still knew that he did not like it. She would have preferred to drive the van there herself, but she needed to get changed first and also wanted to take the Jack Rabbit – just in case Heidenstein needed a ride home.

"I owe you", she said. "I'll be there in about an hour."

"Okay. See you then."

"Yeah, bye." She hung up, before accelerating the motorcycle.

A bit more than an hour later Pakhet pulled up in front of the garage with her Jack Rabbit. She could already see both Heidenstein and the van (a white CMG Bulldog which actually seemed to be in rather good condition) standing there. Robert was probably around, too, as he would not trust any shadowrunner.

It was obvious, that Heidenstein had a lot more patience than she had herself, as he was calmly waiting leaned against the back of the van. When he saw her getting out of her car he stood up properly and made a few steps towards her.

Actually she was surprised that he had waited. After all she had guessed that he would just drop the van off. Then again maybe she had been right and he was in need for a ride back home.

"Hey", she greeted him, once she had almost reached the van. "I hope you haven't waited for too long." Already she was eyeing at the van. From nearby it was apparent that it was a used car. The paint was a bit worn, there were a few small notches in the car body and if she was not mistaken the springs were also worn out.

"Not at all", Heidenstein replied with a smile.

"I did not think you would come over this early", she said, while circling the car once.

"Well, we'll need to start early to get anything done today", Heidenstein said still smiling.

Pakhet raised an eyebrow. "We?", she echoed.

"You are more than welcome to take care of that on your own, but I thought I might be able to help you out a bit."

"Do you know anything about mechanics?", she asked once more suppressing a sigh.

"A thing or two", he replied a bit sardonically. "If you assemble cyber-limbs for a living, you'll tend to get the gist of it."

"A car is no cyber-limb." Though Pakhet had to admit that she herself had no idea how exactly cyber-implants worked.

Heidenstein shrugged. "No, normally they are more complicated. The cyber-limbs, that is."

For a moment Pakhet paused. "Well, but they don't use combustion engines."

At that Heidenstein grinned. "No", he admitted, "most of them don't. You think you can show me the ropes then?"

Now Pakhet gave a sigh – maybe a bit melodramatic. "Alright. But then you tell me how the hell the little mishap came to be? I asked the fool yesterday, but his tale left a few questions open."

"I guess with 'the fool' you mean Dacart?"

"Indeed."

Heidenstein smirked. "Fine with me", he replied. "Now, where do we put the car?"

Pakhet looked around. She could not see Robert anywhere, but he was probably somewhere inside. "Wait a moment", she said. "I need to find somebody to give me a key." With that she went over to the main garage from where she could hear the sound of some electric tools. "Schneider?", she shouted, calling Robert by his last name. After all she still went with the "somebody who was willing to rent me the garage" story. Nobody should know that Robert was her friend – just in case she made the wrong enemies.

Not soon after she had the key for one of the smaller repair shops to the side of the garage. It was actually still one of those oldtime manual keys used to lift the garage gate, as the smaller shop had its own gate.

Actually she was rather thankful that Robert had not hung around to wait for her, because she was not sure whether he would tip someone off. Yes, Heidenstein seemed to be a nice guy, but seven years in the shadows was enough to teach you that it was especially the nice guy whom to be cautious around.

Soon the van was standing on the service lift in the shop with the gate closed behind them.

The motor was still running smoothly – at least it sounded like it – though it would need a general overhaul considering that Bulldogs were most certainly not known for their speed.

Pakhet got herself a glow stick before lifting the van up to check its lower side.

"Now", she began while scanning the wiring for obvious faults, "what happened?"

"Where should I start?", Heidenstein replied. He climbed down beneath the car himself, also scanning the belly of the car.

"Well, what I know: That gang stole the stuff. You somehow were all hired for the run", she said. "That's about it when it comes to what I know for sure. And something about an ork-buddy."

"Okay, from the very beginning then", Heidenstein started with a sigh. "We were hired for something big. Something even we don't quite know about yet. Schmidt said he is

tasked to train us to be the emergency team in case that 'the first team' doesn't make it."

"How charming", Pakhet commented.

"Yes. Quite. Anyway... Schmidt figured that while we trained we could just as well salvage some supplies. That kind, you can hardly come by – at least by normal means. One of those supplies were explosives. He told us some gang had hijacked a corp's delivery..."

That was the part Michael had already stumbled across. "The Iron Raiders getting the stuff from Hoch- und Tiefbau, right?"

"Exactly. We did some legwork, discovered that the gang were the Iron Raiders. We also found out where they had their hideout, where they used to hang out and so on." For a moment Heidenstein paused to think. "Two of our team – the brawlers, if you'd want to put it like that – were set up to infiltrate them. We made contact with the gang in one of their bars, put on a nice show for them to proof themselves and made sure the gang was convinced to take them in. Subtle, of course."

"Let me guess: The two of them were Dacart and his 'ork-buddy', eh?" Pakhet climbed out from beneath the car to check on the motor.

"Yes. Them. The only ones who made for believable gangers." He did not follow yet but still seemed to study the wiring. "At first everything seemed to go according to plan. They confirmed the location of the explosives and started to win the Raiders' trust. So we planned for them to actually steal the needed explosives."

"And then everything went BOOM, eh?"

He, too, climbed out from underneath the car, his expression sour. "Yeah." The look on his face made it unmistakably clear that he was still angry about what had happened. "The two of them were to get into the building the gangers were storing the explosives in, acting as part of the gang. After all they were close to being accepted gang members. Slap, Kah Pak and I had scouted out a nearby empty building from where we would be able to supervise and support them, if needed. Slap for matrix support, Kah Pak magically and I for medical support. Also I had my sniper's rifle along, just in case." He took out a bullet from his jacket to show her.

The bullet's tip was entirely made out of yellowish gel, something Pakhet had seen before. "Gel rounds, eh?"

"Yeah. Didn't want to actually kill somebody", he said wryly.

"Not too stupid. At least makes for less enemies – for the most part." Pakhet gave a short smirk, barely noticeable. She herself tried to avoid unnecessary kills, but she knew as well that especially many younger street sams did not do the same.

"Kah Pak summoned a spirit to protect Tower – the 'ork-buddy' – invisibly and the two of them went in." Heidenstein gave a long sigh. "I don't know exactly what went wrong, but something did. Next thing we knew fighting broke out. Slap messed with their equipment, I shot some of the gangers I could see through the barricaded windows and the two of them fought their way to the storage room. Tower almost got killed by some kind of explosive trap, but they managed to get to the explosives." Pakhet looked at him. "And then BOOM?", she asked half jokingly.

"Not quiet yet. The gang got reinforcements and Slap and I had to lay down suppressive fire, but couldn't hold them off from getting into the building. In the meantime – or so Dacart says – they somehow managed to brake down a part of the rear wall... And then Tower rigged the remaining explosives. Then BOOM." Heidenstein's expression hardened, when he got to that part.

Pakhet sighed, though partly amused. "And they managed to get out of there in one

piece?"

"Didn't see that part. But from what Dacart says they somehow escaped into a nearby manhole."

"Hence the stink", Pakhet remarked.

"Yeah", Heidenstein said. "And that about covers it. After that we retreated to the save-house. Since the goods were now hot, Slap and Hazel tried to hack into HanSec and obscure the trail. Or at least they tried. Hazel barely made it out and that was when we decided to hire some outside help."

"And that's where I came in." Pakhet looked up from under the hood. "And the pretty useless mage."

"He claimed to be able to make things invisible", Heidenstein quickly explained. "And it seemed like a good idea, in case HanSec tried to search for the explosives one house at a time."

Somewhat amused Pakhet remarked: "Well, he did not quite live up to it, did he now?"

Heidenstein just shrugged. "No time to check beforehand."

"True." With that Pakhet closed the hood and leaned against it. This was still too entertaining to interrupt it with technical explanations. "One thing though: Did you really consider breaking into HanSec for chrome-head to hack into their servers?"

"I was voting against it, but yes, somebody brought it up. Thankfully you convinced them otherwise."

"I always tried my best to stay on HanSec's good side... Well, too not end up on their bad side. I ignore them, they ignore me. Would've been a pity to put a black spot on that record."

With a bemused smile Heidenstein nodded, before he finally got back to business.

"About the van", he started. "I believe the break lines are pretty loose."

Pakhet gave a short smirk and nodded. "You believe right. Also the suspension should be exchanged and the motor will need a general overhaul, at least if you are going to use it as an escape vehicle." And with that they got to work.

V – Unwilling ally

Pakhet had to admit that Heidenstein was a rather quick learner and more of a help than she would have guessed. Then again it was rather apparent from his demeanour that he probably had enjoyed academic education and probably was brighter than a typical shadowrunner. Most of all though she was glad that he seemed to have no problem with getting his hands dirty. And while he was not very strong and hence could not help with everything, his witty sense of humour certainly made the work more entertaining at least. Also he had a keen eye and was able to spot minor problems, which was a good help for checking and re-checking their work.

In the end it took them only two afternoons to get every problem with the van fixed. "The team" paid her, she relayed some money to Robert for allowing them to use the garage and then she thought she was done with this chapter. Of course she kept Heidenstein contacts – knowing street docs was just too invaluable.

So she ended up with more free time. Michael did not have any more jobs for her and it seemed that the terror alarm did made for quite some recess, which would be a problem if it lasted.

Still. At least it gave her some time to train and spend some private time with Robert, who all too often complained she was taking her "work" too serious and did not spend enough free time. Of course this was ridiculous considering that she often only worked two, three days a week and lay low the rest of the time. But in the end she liked that he worried a bit about her and she certainly did not complain about lazy evening eating pizza and watching old action movies.

But that would not help paying her rent. And four days after having finished the car she already felt itchy and could barely hold back herself from calling Michael several times a day.

It was on this fourth afternoon, that her commlink started ringing while she was working out. With a mental command she picked up. "Yes?"

A video display appeared in her vision. Dacart grinning at her. "Hey, Pakhet."

"Oh fuck", she muttered and hung up.

Apparently she had forgotten to destroy the metalink from which she had used to rent the truck. And as all her metalinks redirected any incoming calls to her main commlink he had probably been able to call her that way.

Not a minute later her commlink was once again informing her about an incoming call. She ignored it, but it took about twenty seconds until the caller gave up.

"Finally", she muttered to herself. Dacart was certainly a fool, but even he should be able to deduct her disinterest in any further interaction.

Well, it turned out he was not. About three minutes later somebody with an unknown number called again and again she ignored it. But even then it was not the end of it. Again two or three minutes passed, then another call came in. This time she blocked the calling number and thought that now she was finally done with it.

But even though he was clearly a fool, even Dacart seemed to know the rule about owning mutable metalinks. Another call, a new number.

She sighed, jumped from the treadmill and picked up again. "Whatever it is, Dacart, the answer is no. I am not interested!" Already she wanted to hang up, when Dacart spoke:

"But you could make money!"

For a moment Pakhet hesitated. She really did not want to have anything to do with Dacart, but the truth was that she needed money and if the month continued as it was she would be unable to meet her payments. "Talk. Quickly."

"I might have some job. And I thought I could make up for something", he explained quickly. "It is supposed to be a milk-run."

That set off Pakhet's alarm. There was no such thing as a milk run. Whenever somebody said a mission was supposed to be a milk run, there was a big catch to it.

"How much?"

"10 000 for the team? Maybe a bit more. Have not met the Johnson yet."

Pakhet gave a long sigh. She really did not want to do this, even 1600 would be a help right now. And maybe there was a bit more in. She would most certainly not risk her life for that amount of money. But after all it probably would not hurt to talk with the Johnson. "Alright", she said drawing out both syllables. "I will accompany you when you go meeting the Johnson. Then I will make my decision."

"Great!" Dacart seemed to be satisfied.

"When do we meet? And where?"

"Altona. In two hours. I'll send you the address."

"Great", Pakhet said and most certainly did not mean it.

Once she had hung up she gave a long sigh. Somehow she had the feeling that this "team" was just all sorts of bad news. After all they were the ones responsible for the terror alarm after all. And if it was not for her conscience she probably would just have sold them out to HanSec to get rid of this problem.

But as it was this was quite possible the only way to make some money for weeks, so she certainly would not slip it away that easily. And after all she had worked with other fools before, with some even several times, and that had not been that bad – at least that was what she told herself.

This just had to not become a habit. She did not want to be part of any "team" and most certainly not of this particular one! In the shadow one was better off alone and far away from fools.

She ended her training and went for her car to get back home. The weather had been changeable for the entire day making the car the better way to get around. At her home she took a shower, put on some more formal clothing and then sat down in front of the troid to pass some time.

When she finally left her house she was still early and would probably arrive about fifteen minutes early. That was when Dacart called again: "Pakhet, by the way: Can you fetch me? I don't have a car and my motorcycle kinda blew up..."

She cursed him and for a moment considered to just get to the meeting alone. But then again she did not know anything about the Johnson and his connection to Dacart. Of course it might be worth a wager, but it was not her style after all.

So she quickly left her home, got into the Jackrabbit and drove to the address Dacart had sent her. The young man was standing there and waved at her, when he saw the car approaching. Was he really so oblivious to the fact that he annoyed the living hell out of her? In a way he was a lot like Michael – just more stupid.

"Get in and hurry", Pakhet barked at him without even so much as an "hello". "And stay quiet for heaven's sake."

"Alright", he replied and grinned broadly.

Pakhet gave a sigh and hoped that he stayed true to his word, while doing her best to still get to the meeting point in time. Thankfully there were three things working in

her favour: She knew a couple of shortcuts, her car did not move on the grid and Dacart actually did keep quiet for the entire way. Thus it was two minutes before time, when they arrived at the location, a pretty normal looking street in Neue Mitte, where they found Baramesus and Slap waiting.

"You invited them, too, eh?", Pakhet muttered.

"Of course", Dacart replied with a smile. "We are a team after all. The doc and Kah Pak will be there, too, but later... I guess..."

"A team. Sure." Pakhet got out of the car, wishing to have not come. But then again: Money. And the lack thereof. "Whatever."

If she interpreted the look in the red cyber-eyes of Slap right, he did not seem to happy either to see her again. Well, at least that feeling was mutual. He just gave her a short nod, before turning away again. Baramesus again did not say anything, nor did he give any motion that he had noticed her, but quietly leaned against the wall.

"We are still on time!", Dacart announced after getting out of the car. "Great. And thank you guys for coming, by the way." He basically raced for the door to ring the bell.

It was about five seconds, until the buzzer let them in. The house at least seemed to be a completely normal apartment building. The staircase was actually in rather good shape and the apartments seemed to be lived in.

Dacart was taking the lead, running up to the third floor. With yet another sigh Pakhet followed and so did Baramesus and Slap, though a bit slower then the former two.

On the third floor they found a door opened with a human man standing in front of it – obviously a guard, as he wore his pistol rather obvious. And if to fulfil a certain cliché he also wore sunglasses, even though they were inside.

Pakhet just nodded at him, before entering the apartment right after Dacart.

The guard waited for all of them to enter, before closing the door again and nodding over to another open door. For a moment Dacart hesitated, looking at the rest of them, but when Pakhet shot him an impatient gaze he entered the room.

Surprisingly the room seemed just like a normal living room. There was a cupboard, a trideo, a sofa, a table and chairs sitting around it. Sure, it was a bit weird that both the sofa and the chairs were covered with plastic foil, but there were people with a weird sense for hygiene. The curtains were closed, too, but that was not too big of a surprise.

A woman sat at the table. From what Pakhet estimated, she was at her early 40s, though it was not easy to say for sure, as the lighting in the room was rather dim. After all it was quite possible that she tried to disguise herself with make-up. Her hair was brown and barely reached down to her shoulders. She wore a formal suit and seemed to be patiently waiting for them.

Another guard was standing behind her, one hand at his holster.

There was one chair positioned directly opposed to the woman, while two others were standing more to the side of it.

Dacart hesitated, but took a seat too the side. For a moment Pakhet pondered for a moment, whether she wanted to have Slap or Baramesus take the spot of the negotiator before quickly deciding that she was rather to take that spot herself.

She sat down, noticing that Baramesus eyed at her angrily for a short moment – a moment that Slap used to sit down on the last chair, making Baramesus stand behind them.

Pakhet waited for the Johnson to start talking and hoped the rest of the group was that reasonable as well.

"So, who of you was the one sent here? Dacart, I believe?", asked the Johnson, leaning forward a bit.

Immediately the adept raised his hand. "Me!"

The Johnson searchingly eyed at him for a moment. "I see. And the rest of you are?"

Before anyone of the others could speak, Pakhet replied: "My name is Pakhet. These two are Baramesus and Slap." She looked the Johnson right in the eye, even though she knew it did not quite have the same effect with cyber-eyes. But the gesture was still clear.

A thin-lipped smile appeared on the woman's face. "Very well. I have a mission for you. And you have two days to accomplish it." She paused for a moment, looking at Dacart, Baramesus and Slap one after one. "You see, there is a auction taking place here in Hamburg the day after tomorrow. Of course this is an auction of delicate matter. It takes place every few month and there has been a particular bidder, that must not attend the coming auction, if you understand me."

Pakhet pursed her lips. She was not quite sure, whether she liked the sound of that. "You mean, we should kill him?"

Quickly the Johnson shook her head. "No. Of course not. I want you to just make sure, that he is unable to get to that auction. Preferably he will go free after it."

Pakhet relaxed at bit. "Alright." Knocking somebody out and locking him up for two days was no preferred method of hers, but it was doable and certainly better then wetwork. "Okay. What can you tell us about this 'particular bidder'?"

"Here is a picture of him", the woman answered and showed them a holopic of a young man – probably in his 20s. "He arrives at the auction by taxi and goes by the name of Maximilian Winter. But you don't even have to try looking the name up. I have already confirmation that it is a fake identity. From what my research suggests, he arrives at Hamburg always three days before the auction, stays somewhere – I don't know where – and apparently takes a taxi from the Bismarck memorial to the auction sometime on the day of the auction."

"So basically we only know the fake name, that he is probably in town and will take a taxi sometime tomorrow", Pakhet said, her voice doubting.

The woman nodded. "That covers it."

"That should be doable, right?", Dacart said. "We could wait for him at the memorial."

Pakhet did not reply to him but rather fixated on the Johnson. "How much?"

"You have not been told?", the Johnson said, now looking over to Dacart. "10 000."

Once again Pakhet make sure to look her in the eye. "That's not enough."

"That is the offer", the Johnson replied. She looked back at Pakhet with a stern look in her eyes.

Pakhet did not quite know about this certain auction, but she could figure as much as that it was a black market auction. Michael attended those kind of auctions regularly and she had accompanied him several times, knowing the prices at which wares were traded in. There was more money to make here. "15 000."

"10 000", the Johnson replied.

"Then there is no deal", Pakhet said without even batting an eyelid.

She could feel Dacart leaning over to her. "What are you doing?", he whispered.

Once again she ignored him. As the Johnson did not immediately reply, she spoke again. "As I see this, we might have to go for a shoot-out at a public location – a bit risky, right? Also we have little information and you need results as fast as possible."

It was almost visible how the Johnson, though keeping a stern face, suppressed a sigh.

"Alright. 12 000."

"14 000", Pakhet offered.

It was now the Johnson who made sure to look her in the eye, staring at her for almost five seconds straight. Then the woman relaxed. "Alright. 13 000. That is all I can offer. And I'll give you an advance of 3000." She took out a cred-stick.

For a moment Pakhet hesitated. But for some reason this really seemed all she could get out of this. Well, probably there had been a given limit by whomever pulled the strings here. "Alright. Deal", she said.

The Johnson extended her hand and Pakhet shook it, though she could almost feel the evil glare of Baramaus in her back.

"Don't pull such a stunt again without talking it over with us first!", chrome-head scolded her, once they were back on the street.

Pakhet only looked up from the metalink the Johnson had given her for contact for short moment. "So you don't want the extra money?"

"It could have cost us all the money", Slap replied.

Without looking at him Pakhet shook her head. "No. It could not. She was out of options. Apparently already behind her time table. She had to make a deal with us."

"You cannot know that!" He glared at her. "There are tons of runners out in this city desperate for a job."

"But she would have to make contact first", Pakhet just replied.

Boldly Dacart stepped between them: "Stop arguing! I am happy it worked out well and that there is more money. But should we not start with the task at hand, so we can get the money?"

"We should", Pakhet said, finally looking up from the commlink.

Once more Baramaus glared at her. "Who made you the boss? Just for the record, I could have made that deal just as well."

For a moment Pakhet looked at him, but did not say anything. Instead she once more took a look at the commlink on which the Johnson had saved all the information, she supposedly had. But no matter how much she looked at it, there was no certain clue. The only thing that seemed certain was that he would turn up on the plaza in front of the memorial the next day.

"So, what are we going to do now?", asked Dacart and looked at them.

"Meeting up with the doc and Kah Pak, I guess", chrome-head replied.

Pakhet looked at him. "Where?"

For a moment nobody replied, but then it was Dacart that spoke again. "Can't we just go and meet at the doc's hospital?"

"I am not sure, that's a good idea", Pakhet replied. After all it seemed that the hospital was a normal working hospital with a street clinic attached to it. Then again it was Heidenstein's decision to make.

This thought apparently crossed Slap's mind, too. "Why don't we just ask Doc Heidenstein?"

"Yeah, let's just ask him", Baramaus agreed. "I mean, it is not like we have anywhere else to meet."

With a sigh Pakhet took out her own commlink, when Dacart suddenly stopped her.

"Actually we do have somewhere else!", he exclaimed. "My... One of my buddies he owns a bar. I think we can meet there. It is not even far from here! Wait a moment, yes?" He took out a metalink and quickly dialled a number. The following short phonecall went something like that: "Hey Krishan! – Yeah, yeah, I'm alright. Hey, I need your help. – Of course! No, just me and some chummers. We need somewhere to talk."

– Thanks, buddy. Yeah, see you later.” And with that he hung up and grinned at them. “Yeah, we can meet at the Druiden.”
“Very well”, Pakhet said. “Address?”
Dacart named an address that indeed was not too far away. From what Pakhet knew it was only about nine blocks away.
Slap looked up the address on a map. “And how are we going to get there?”

When Pakhet arrived at the bar, she still could not believe it. A group of runners and only two of them had a car? How did they think that was supposed to work? Alright, she could see that Dacart lost his motorcycle – but the rest? Yes, it was why they wanted a van for the group, but it was still ridiculous.

The bar Dacart had led her too, was located in a small alleyway next to one of the wider streets. The area was in a rather better condition than what she would have expected. Yes, there were a few graffiti on several buildings, but the streets and the building themselves were in good shape.

The Druiden seemed to be a small, but not too shabby bar. It had a few darkened windows facing the alleyway. There was a dark shield hanging over the door with the name of the bar written on it in white letters. Apparently the bar was still closed – after all it was still early in the afternoon.

Dacart knocked at the door once they arrived and not soon after somebody opened the door. The man letting them in was an ork, probably in his early twenties. He smiled at them. “Good to see you, hon.” He patted Dacart's back. “So, what's going on?”

“Just the run you sent me on, dear”, the adept answered with a smile. “Need to talk something over with my chummers.”

Pakhet bit her lip to not argue, that she was not anybody's chummer.

Now the ork extended his hand to her. “Hey. My name is Krishan. And you are?”

“Name is Pakhet”, she said and took his hand. He had a firm grip, just like Herr Schmidt.

“Come in.” The ork stepped aside to let them in. “Dacart, the backroom. You can go there.”

“Thanks, honey”, Dacart answered with a smile, before leading Pakhet into the bar and to a room behind the counter.

The room there was fitted with a table and several chairs around it. It looked like the cliché of that kind of rooms used to play poker. As none of the others was there yet and she saw no point to keep standing up she pulled a chair and sat down.

“Can I bring you anything?”, Dacart asked.

“Coffee”, Pakhet said. Somehow she had the feeling, that this would once again be a long day.

As an answer stuck his thumb up. “Okay.”

Once again Pakhet took out the metalink and scrolled over the information. She wondered whether Michael knew something about this guy, as he would probably be at that auction, too. Maybe she would have been better off being his bodyguard on that auction – but then again there was probably a very specific reason he had not asked her. Still, she would have to ask him about Mr Winter.

Damn it, how were they to find him? She really did not want to pick a fight on one of the tourist hotspots of the city. Especially not considering that HanSec was still vigilant. But maybe they would not have a choice.

Baramus and Slap arrived only about three minutes after them. Both of them seemed to be still pissed about being forced to take a cap. But Pakhet did not address

that issue again, as it was not really her problem after all.

Instead she sipped her soykaf and scrolled over the information again. The auction would take place on the next day late in the evening. They had until then.

Next after Baramesus and Slap came Heidenstein – about fifteen minutes later. He once again wore a coat with the Crashcart logo on it. She had seen him wear it before and in a way it made sense as Crashcart personnel normally had some reason to be at a shoot-out.

"Hey", he greeted them. "Sorry, I am late."

Dacart shrugged. By now he was slurping his second Pina Colada through a drinking straw. "Don't worry. You are still earlier than Kah Pak. Want a drink?"

For a moment the look on Heidenstein's face was doubting. "Coffee, I guess."

"Man, you are boring", Dacart said but once more got up to get another soykaf.

Heidenstein sat down placing his med-kit next to his chair. "I've taken the van here, by the way."

"Thankfully", chrome-head sighed. "We had to take a cab here."

Heidenstein just nodded and leaned back for a moment. "Sorry that I could not be there before. I had to work."

"It is okay", Pakhet said with a sigh.

Not much later Dacart came back with a cup of soykaf and placed it in front of Heidenstein, before sitting down again. He seemed to be rather content with his Pina Colada and took out his comlink to play a game.

"So, what are we hired for exactly?", Heidenstein asked.

When nobody hurried to answer, Pakher shrugged. "Short version: We shall apprehend somebody and make sure that he won't appear on an auction that takes place tomorrow." She shoved the metalink over to him. "Long version, when Kah Pak is here, too."

Once again Heidenstein nodded and took up the metalink to scroll through the information.

And so they waited for Kah Pak, who finally arrived about another fifteen Minutes after Heidenstein.

"Finally", Baramesus grunted when the elf entered the room. "Where have you been."

"I was outside of Hamburg", Kah Pak said. "I am sorry that you had to wait for too long. I had to take a taxi and waited quite a while for it."

Pakhet gave a sigh. Another one without his own vehicle. Great. "It's alright", she said.

"We just should get to work because we don't have a lot of time."

"Sure", the shaman agreed. "What are we here for."

It seemed that Baramesus was done with letting Pakhet speak and cut in even before she could start talking: "We were hired by a Mrs. Johnson. There will be an auction taking place tomorrow. She will attend the auction and does want us to keep a certain person from attending the auction. I guess she does not want competition on a certain item."

"You assume too much", Pakhet muttered. "But we have to come up with a plan. Of course we can wait for him at the Bismarck memorial." She looked over at Kah Pak. "That is from where he always takes a taxi to the auction." Then she continued: "We could set up a trap there."

"But there are too many people", Slap interjected.

"Exactly", Pakhet agreed. "It would be still a possibility if we use Baramesus' invisibility spell – but we will only have one shot at it."

"I don't like it." Heidenstein shook his head.

Dacart loudly slurped his drink. "We need to find out, where this guy is right now."

With yet another sigh Pakhet looked over to him. "Exactly."

For a moment there was silence, before Slap made a suggestion: "Well, on the plaza in front of the memorial are quite a few cameras. Maybe I can hack into them and find out more."

Heidenstein was eyeing out the window, while Pakhet once again drove up the street in Harburg, where Michael had his shop.

The others had gone to the Bismarck memorial to see whether they could find out something through the Matrix. But going there with six persons would have drawn too much attention and Pakhet still wanted to talk to Michael, to see whether he knew something about Mr. Winter. If that guy was really on almost every auction as the Johnson had said, Michael had probably met him. And as Michael tended to know everything about every person he ever met – well, at least he claimed too – it was a good start.

Heidenstein, too, said, that he might know somebody, who might be able to give some information and Pakhet certainly preferred his company over any of the others. Then again she wondered, whether there would be an explosion at the memorial before the end of the day.

Once again she found the shop opened and could see Michael negotiating with somebody inside.

Before getting out of the car, she paused though. "A friendly word of advice, doc. Be careful what you say around Michael. He is good at finding stuff out about you. More than you would guess." She looked at Heidenstein.

This time it was him who raised an eyebrow. "Okay. Warning noted."

She had not told him, that Michael was her fixer. After all the "Trust no one" rule was still quite high on her list of personal rules. The more people knew about you, the either it would be to hunt you down.

"Good." She got out of the car, before waiting for Heidenstein. When the car was locked they went up for the shop. The man Michael was arguing with spoke what sounded like Russian. He was muscular and wore a clearly armoured jacket. Either a runner or a member of one of the Russian gangs. As Pakhet was unable to understand them, she could not say exactly what they spoke about, but considering there were two weapons on the counter, she was rather sure that the point of their discussion had to do with prices.

Michael did not even look at Pakhet and Heidenstein once and gave no other indication, that he had noticed them. He looked actually more stern, than he usually did, but still was able to keep that annoying smile of his on his face.

The discussion lasted for almost three more minutes, before a cred stick and both weapons changed hands.

The guy – whoever he was – seemed to be not quite content with the deal he had made, but left the shop without further ado.

It was not before Michael had brought the cred stick into his safe and returned that he actually looked at them. "Hey, Pakhet. What was that about calling?"

"I just happened to be in the area and thought I dropped by", she said sardonically.

A smirk appeared on Michael's face. "Well, how very nice of you. Then what is it, I can do for you and..." Questioningly he looked at Heidenstein.

"Doctor Heidenstein", the doc replied. "I happened to accompany her."

"Well, this is nice." Michael did not even try to hide his sarcasm. "Again: Why are you

here." He looked at Pakhet again.

Pakhet shrugged and got out the metalink. "Long story short: You know about the auction that takes place tomorrow?"

For a moment Michael paused to eye at her suspiciously. "In fact I know. Why? You are not wanting to bid on anything."

"No", Pakhet said. "I am only looking for information. Where does this auction take place?"

"Why do you need to know this?" Of course Michael was not going to give out information as easy as this, but neither would she.

"I have my reasons."

"And I have reasons to not tell you." Michael smiled at her. He knew very well, that she would not shoot him that easily.

Pakhet looked at him for a moment. Michael loved to act, as if he was fearless. She knew him well enough to understand that he was not fearless, but just well prepared. Once again she hated his smile and would have loved to wipe it from his face, but she did not do anything. "Okay. 100 Nuyen for information on that auction."

At this Michael grinned, hardly suppressing a laugh. "Alright: Blackmarket auction. Big guns. Takes place at the old airport. 3000 Nuyen for entry fee. Per bidder. That's all you get for 100."

Pakhet looked at the metalink and selected the picture of Winter. "Okay. Next question: You know him?" She held the metalink before him. "200 for any random information. 400, if you can tell us, where he is right now."

"Well. Don't know where he is. And I kinda think, that I want to know what you have to do with him. A run I don't know about, I guess. Well, I know he acts under the name Maximilian 'Max' Winter. He goes to different auctions and only bids on very particular items. He bids ridiculous amounts. I am pretty sure, he is bidding for somebody help. Maybe a runner. Maybe a particular kind of wage slave. He also pays a taxi driver to stay at the airport until the auction is over. And I kinda feel, like this information is worth more."

"I already knew most of that." Turning of the metalink again Pakhet took out a credstick to pay him. "Well, thank you anyway."

"You need to tell me about this run and where it came from."

"Maybe." She turned around and nodded to the doc. "Well, I will be going."

Michael checked the stick, but then seemed to remember something. "Hey, Heidenstein, can I have your contacts? I fathom that you are a combat medic."

Pakhet focussed on Heidenstein, silently mouthing: "Don't. Don't do it." She herself had gotten in to much trouble, since she had agreed to help out Michael. Hell, thanks to Michael she had almost died on her first run and still had a scar from it.

"Medic, yes", Heidenstein replied and looked over to Michael. Pakhet could not tell whether he did not see her or chose to ignore her. "I have a street clinic, too."

Michael smiled. "Wonderful. It is really hard to come by street docs, you see."

"Of course." Heidenstein gave him his contacts, as well as the address of the street clinic.

Pakhet left the shop teeth-gnashingly and waited for Heidenstein at the car. When the motor was finally running, she looked over too him. His expression was indifferent, though there was a hint of a smirk playing on his lips, which seemed to be as much his "standard expression" as hers a stern and angry look. Still, there was something about this indifference, that made her mad right now – or maybe it was just, that he had ignored her.

"Not that it is any of my concern", she muttered, "but that was a mistake."

With apparent surprise he looked at her. "Why?"

"Because you cannot trust Michael. He is sly. Very sly. Even by shadow standards."

Heidenstein shrugged. "As a street doc I make a living by people knowing where to find me."

"Then you'll just have to hope, that you won't end up on his wrong side."

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 off 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 were 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 Baramaus 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", Baramaus 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 in a 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 Baramaus 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", Baramaus 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 Baramaus 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", Baramaus 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 Baramaus 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", Baramaus 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", Baramaus 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 Baramaus slapped 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", Baramaus 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 Baramaus.

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", Baramaus said and held his hand.

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

"Baramaus, 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.

"Baramaus!", 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?", Baramus 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", Baramaus 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." Baramaus 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 Baramesus 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 Baramaus. As neither chrome-head, nor the elf moved – and it was not their space anyway – Pakhet opened the door. Indeed both Baramaus 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 Baramaus, 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", Baramaus 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 ware hired to keep him from going to the auction", Baramaus 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", Baramaus 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", Baramaus 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 Baramaus, 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 Baramesus 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.

Baramesus, 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 tomorrow's auction."

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

"Sure", Baramesus 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." Baramesus' voice was gushing with malice. "Sure."

"Look", Dacart quickly interjected. "We don't want to kill you. Those two here" – he gesticulated towards Baramesus 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 Baramus was indeed willing to use the gun once he was at the end of his patience.

"Shut up", Baramus 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 Baramus 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.

Baramus 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?", Baramus asked.

"I don't know. Have only talked to him on phone." He saw the questioning look on Baramus 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", Baramus 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?", Baramus said with a determined smile.

Pakhet really had to keep herself under control, as she was really torn 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.”

Baramus 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 Baramus 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 Baramus. “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?”

Baramus 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!”, Baramus 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 Baramus 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.

VII – Personal rule

The curtains of the hotel room were only a weak safeguard against the glaring neon light from the streets outside, nor did the windows themselves do a good job to keep the noise outside.

The room itself was dark – well, as dark as the curtains allowed it to be. It was a rather spacey room and at least superficially in a rather and good condition, though it was doubtful that the cleanness went too deep beneath the sheets. Then again the location of the hotel made it likely that most people who came here did not worry about it.

And neither did Pakhet. She did not mind the light from outside or the noise from the street. She also did not think about the cleanness, when she was sitting on the side of the bed, her eyes focussed on a gap between the two curtains, without really seeing it.

Her thoughts still would not calm down, though it had been three days since they had finished the run on Winter. Of course it had ended as she predicted, with their Johnson being considerably pissed at them, only paying them the 10 000 she had offered in the first place. Now she could just hope, that she would not meet anyone of those idiots again – well, except Heidenstein it seemed, as so far he had not phoned her about the Parashield.

She was angry with herself and she was not even sure why, as there were many possible reasons. She should have stuck to her own rules and not have run with that group again. After all she had known they were idiots and still she had herself be talked into it. Also she should have stopped Baramesus and the others from betraying the Johnson. She definitely had made a mistake and she just did not know why. It was not her style. Nothing of this was.

Of course she had made mistakes before and every time she had learned from it and had done her best not to repeat those mistakes. When a run was finished, she thought about it and about what she could have done differently and then was done with it.

It also was not the first time that other runners had pissed her off. There were a lot of cruel shadowrunners out there. People, who relished in killing others. People, who were plainly insane. In some cases she had to keep herself from killing the runners she had been teaming up with – but that, too, she would just forget after the run most of the time.

Yes, there had been a few situations that had not been that easily forgotten, but all of them had been more grave then what had happened on that run. It was just, that Baramesus had really, really pissed her off. Well, and there was something else, she could not just put her finger on.

Still. Normally some distraction helped against any such problem. This time the distraction had introduced himself as “Stefan” and said he was a secretary at Blohm + Voss. They had met in a bar, had shared a few drinks and then taken a room. He had been cute and was now sleeping peacefully.

His short brown hair looked almost black in the twilight of the room. Pakhet estimated him to be at the end of his twenties and wondered, whether he was one of those guys boasting about having been laid later on or one of the kind who had actually hoped for something more. Well, she would not know and also did not really care.

She had just waited for him to fall asleep to be finally able to leave. After all he was one of many and it was the same every time: A bar, drinking, a room, sneaking out after the guy fell asleep. It seemed the most reasonable way to her. No matter how much she valued mind over matter, even she had certain needs. Apart from that she found sex to make for a good distraction from whatever would be on her mind.

It was easiest this way. Bar, drinking, room. She would never meet any of them again, would have forgotten them after a few days and never think of them again. She also never fell asleep next to any of them. After all paranoia was, what had kept her alive so far.

Some might have called it heartless, but after all that was the way the world had become. And in the end she really had no mind for anything more than sex. Relationships of any kind would get you killed in the shadows. Even her friendship with Robert was risky – maybe not for her, but for him, and she really would not want him to die. He had been the only constant in her life for almost twenty years.

With a weak smile on her face she looked at Stefan and finally stood up, walking up to the window, picking up her dress on the way. She was still only wearing her underwear. Pulling one of the two curtains aside she looked down on the street for a moment.

Down there was the northern end of the Kiez and quite a few people were down there, drinking, partying, flirting. Many of them were probably wageslaves, who came here to forget about their boring daily life, but some down there would be other shadowrunners and some of them would probably be Vory, as she knew this was Vory territory. This was the Kiez of Hamburg, where both words always collided.

She shook her head, closed the gap between the curtains and pulled on the black dress again. With a last gaze over at Stefan she got into her shoes, pulled over her jacket and got her purse, before sneaking out of the room.

It was boring. Still there was no proper job up on the horizon. Yes, it was just four days since the Winter-disaster, but Pakhet could not help, but wish for a proper mission to put her live on risk. Because nothing was as good in helping her to get her mind off nagging thoughts as mortal danger was – and she knew very well, that her thinking that way said many things about her psyche and those things were not great.

But what did she care? There was a pretty popular theory out there: All shadowrunners were crazy in one way or the other. Some had become shadowrunners because they were crazy, some became crazy after being a runner for too long. She was not sure which of the two was true for her.

Once again she had gone to the gym to train. Not only to stay in shape, but also to keep her thoughts from running in circles. Running on a treadmill, listening to music was one way to completely clear her mind and it worked always.

At least the cloudy weather outside did a good job at reflecting her mood, she thought when she left the gym and looked up at the sky.

She sighed and got out her comlink. For a moment she considered to call Michael about a job, but then she decided against it and dialled Robert's number instead. She had not hung out with him for over a week and there was nothing as an evening with pizza and dumb action movies from the early 2000s and 2010s.

"Hey, Jo!", Robert's voice said after only a few rings.

She sighed, but did not bother to correct him about her name. "Hey, Rob." She got into her car while talking. "Mind if I come over this evening?"

"Let me think", he said jokingly and made a long pause, as if he was checking a

calender. "No, I don't mind. I might actually have time for you."

Pakhet smiled at this. "Alright. I'll bring pizza."

"Sounds great."

"Okay. That's all. I'll come over at 7pm. Till then."

"Till then", he replied. "I am looking forward to it."

They hung up and Pakhet started her car. She was actually looking forward to this. While she still often regretted to endanger Robert – because she always feared to make the wrong enemy, who would try to hold Robert as a hostage – she knew that she needed him. Two times she had tried to cut her ties to him, but she was unable to endure it.

And so she passed the last three hours until their meeting by taking a good long shower, watching the news, before finally driving over to one of the better pizza places, one of those where they served pizza with real cheese and real meat. Finally she arrived at the apartment building in northern Wandsbeck where Robert was living.

He had been living there for over ten years. The same building, the same floor, the same small one-room apartment.

"Hey there", his voice said from the intercom, before the buzz sounded.

She took the lift up to the fifth floor, where he was already waiting, smiling at her.

"Hey", he said and approached her to hug her.

Robert was her own age but looked rather young as there was something childlike glittering in his eyes. His short hair was still fully brown with a tinge of red. And maybe the freckles on his nose helped the childish appear, too. He was not very athletic, but also did not look terrible out of shape – at least not at the first gaze.

Carefully she held the pizza to the side so it would not fall down. "Hey", she sighed. "Sorry for not stopping by for so long."

"No problem", he replied with a genuine smile. "Come in." He let her to his apartment and waited to close the door behind her. "Much work?"

Pakhet shook her head. "Not exactly. Actually rather the contrary. Since the big boom there is a big lull." She handed him the pizza to get out of her jacket.

"Like in economy, eh?", Robert said jokingly.

She replied with a short smile. "Yeah, more or less like that."

Together they went over to the main room of the apartment. It was a bit untidy as the kitchen sink was filled with unwashed plates. The apartment was too low-standard to be equipped with any sort of dishwasher and Robert tended to just forget about it, until he was out of plates. But Pakhet did not mind. She was rather sure that it would be the same for her, if she had not had a dishwasher and all the other small luxuries for people too lazy to do any housework. Of course she would not have said she was too lazy, but rather that housework was not really her thing.

A large media shelf divided the room in two, with his bed on one side and a proper table with chairs on the kitchen side of the room. It pretty much looked like the worst cliché of a bachelor's suite.

"So what have you been up to?", Robert said, while moving over to the bed side of his room, still carrying the pizza boxes.

"Hanging out with idiots", Pakhet sighed. "Well, not hanging out. I got stuck with a bunch of idiots on a run..."

Robert looked at her with a mix of empathy and amusement on his face. "A special kind of idiots?"

"Indeed", she replied gravely and nodded, before sitting down on the end of his bed.

Of course she could not tell him about those idiots being exactly the idiots who were responsible for the big explosion. "They have been annoying. Unprofessional and annoying. And they had cost me about 600, thanks to being unprofessional."

After a moment Robert sat down besides her and handed her one of the two pizza boxes. "The guy you have spent two days overhauling that car with... He is one of the idiots?"

"Well, he is part of the group. He is the least idiotic of the bunch. But then again he is pretty idiotic to hang out with the rest."

At that Robert raised an eyebrow. "Well, his problem, eh?"

"True", she replied with a shrug. "Just too bad. They will certainly get him killed and there are way to few street docs in this city."

"You're worried?"

"No, just annoyed." Pakhet opened the pizza box. "I hate it to work with people, who are unprofessional."

For a moment Robert was quiet and opened his own box. "Well, you could start working on a proper job."

"You know I can't", she said with a short smile.

He looked at her for a moment. "Joanne...", he started, but she shook her head.

"Joanne is dead." She closed her eyes and drew a long breath. "Anyway. Let's watch a movie. I need something to laugh about."

There was something sad in Robert's eyes, when he looked at her, but then he nodded. They had had such a conversation too many times before and he knew very well, that she would not talk about this anymore. It was over.

So he just got the remote and turned the trideo on. Soon they had turned on a bad action thriller from the early 2000s. Robert was a massive fan for old movies – such a fan, that he even owned an old BluRay-player and quite a few of the old disks. Pakhet was not such a big fan, but she enjoyed watching movies with Robert and annoying him with comments on the movie.

"You cannot shoot a gun like that", she soon started again. "It would break your wrist. Not to mention that you won't hit drek like that."

Robert sighed with spurious annoyance. "I know."

Of course the movie included the obligatory car pursuit with all the typical cliché. Flipping cars, exploding cars and shoot-outs on an highway.

"Cars don't catch fire that easily!", she commented.

"Everybody knows that!", Robert replied with a sigh.

Pakhet knew that most people were aware of all the stupidity in action movie – as the same clichés were still found in modern movies – but she enjoyed it to point it out. Apart from one looked different on things one had to deal with in real life. And as someone who made a living from shooting things, it was to apparent how fake all the movie shoot-outs were.

It also was, why she tended to enjoy Stadtkrieg – Urban Brawl – because while the games were of course somewhat choreographed the played sure knew how to use their weapons.

"You cannot evade bullets like that!"

Robert laughed. "I know that!"

On the next day Pakhet woke up just short before noon. She had been at Robert's till just after midnight. In the end it had been the way it always used to be: Robert had cheered her up and she felt much less annoyed then she had the day before. The only

thing that still bothered her was, that Robert just seemed unable to help himself and had to voice his rejection of shadowrunning. Of course she knew that he was worried – but it was her life after all.

She liked running. She liked risking her life. No matter how wrong that sounded. She liked proving herself over and over again. In the shadows she was respected, in the shadows people did not look down on her – well, some tried, but those regretted it very quickly.

Like every day she got up, got herself a large cup of coffee, checked for mails or missed calls, checked her mails and then went training. She tried to always stay in top condition in any way and apart from that training was a good way to pass time. She went to the shooting range to train with some rifles, got a shower upon returning and sat down to do some reading, while drinking another coffee.

It was one of those boring days she had to try and make the best of. If only Michael called with another run for her. But of course he did not. She had already written off the day, when her comlink started to buzz.

Surprised she picked it up. "Yes? Pakhet here."

"Good evening", the voice of Heidenstein replied.

"Doc?", she asked surprised.

"Yes, Heidenstein here", he replied. "I've finally gotten the Parashield for you. You can get it, if you want."

Pakhet glanced over at the digital time display on her trideo. It was half past seven in the evening. Considering that she would not go to sleep before midnight, there was still time to pass. "Sure, why not. At the hospital?"

Heideinstein did not answer immediately. "Yes", he finally said hesitantly. "That is probably the easiest way."

"Okay. Then I'll be there in twenty minutes or so." Pakhet was already on her way to the door.

"Talk to the receptionist, okay?"

"Sure. On my way", Pakhet replied and hung up. So she got her armoured jacket and her helmet, before going for the garage. Soon she was back on her Suzuki Mirage and on her way to Bergedorf. Thankfully rush hour had already passed, so she got through easily and actually managed to get to the hospital within a quarter of an hour.

Once again the parking lot in front of the hospital was mostly empty. Only three cars were parked here, which once again made her wonder what was up with this hospital. After all it seemed to be a general clinic and there was an acute shortage of those. So why were there not more people coming here?

She parked the Mirage in front of the main entry and entered the building, while taking off her helmet. Once again she noticed the shady looking security guys and the general emptiness of the entry hall. She went for the receptionist desk. Once again it was the same woman that had worked here when they had been here before. "Good evening. I am looking for Doctor Heidenstein", she said, when she came over to her.

The woman looked at her. "Oh", she said after a moment. "Sure. I'll call for him." She typed something on her keyboard. "He should be here in a minute."

"Thank you", Pakhet said and went over to the next wall to lean against it while waiting. She somehow did not feel comfortable enough to properly sit down being very aware of the look one of the guards shot her. She looked back. There really was something about those guards that seemed uncanny to her. She had worked as a guard before she had started over in the shadows and there was just something about those guys that just did not seem right.

About two minutes later Heidenstein came over from one of the doors at the end of the hall. "You're already here?" He was wearing medical scrubs, though she would have bet that he wore something armoured below.

"Of course", she said smirking.

He smiled. "Well, come", he said and nodded at the door he had come through before. Instead of answering she just nodded and followed him through the door. He lead her through a generic hospital corridor filled with the smell of disinfectant that was so common in hospitals. The room he lead her to looked like a treatment room with an additional desk in it. "This is part of the street clinic", he explained, when she looked around.

"Ah", she just said. "Not much going on here, eh?"

"What do you mean?", Heidenstein asked.

"You don't have many patients."

Heidenstein evaded her eyes. "Not right now, no", he answered.

For a while she looked at him, but did not press the topic. She was still curious about it, but she knew it did not concern her. "So, about the weapon?"

He did not reply, but pulled out a drawer from the desk and got out a pistole. "Here." He handed it to her.

Pakhet took the pistol and once again weighed it in her hand. It looked a bit different then the gun Heidenstein used, as it missed the laser pointer attached to his gun.

"Thanks", she said, while still eyeing at the gun.

The doc seemed to notice how she looked at the gun. "I modified mine a bit", he explained before getting out two magazines from the drawer, too. "The ammunition." He handed it to her.

Instead of replying she took the magazines and loaded one clip into the pistole, just to throw it out again. She wanted to get a feeling for how the loading mechanism worked, but it did not seem much different from a pistole.

"I could modify your gun, too", Heidenstein offered.

"No need", she replied and finally net the now again loaded gun glide into a holster on her belt. She never used laserpointers for aiming. On one hand she was too proud of her aiming skills as they were, on the other hand lasers tended to alarm enemies. "But thanks."

He smiled. "Don't mention it."

Something about him really made Pakhet be on edge. She brushed it aside. "Do you have empty rounds? To train with the gun."

"Of course. I can get you a few", he replied. "Oh, and Pakhet?"

Questioningly she raised an eyebrow.

"Be careful with this. Narcoject is pretty strong. So smaller people, children, people with injuries...", he tailed off.

"I understand. They can die through the full dose", Pakhet said.

"Exactly", he replied.

She gave a faint and not entirely honest smile. "I am not entirely ignorant, you know?"

"I never implied that", Heidenstein said.

To that she did reply nothing, though she had swallow a snarly comment. Well, at least he had a very annoying habit, not entirely fitting with the "nice guy" image.

After a moment Heidenstein got up. "Well, I will get you some empty rounds", he said and went for the door. "Wait a moment, okay?"

Pakhet just nodded and leaned against the stretcher in the middle of the room. When he left, she started to look around. The room basically had what one would expect to

find in a hospital's treatment room. There was a shelf with syringes and some bandages, there was a closed locker that probably housed some tools for minor operations and there was a drug cabinet. Compared with some of the other shadow clinics she had been in, it seemed very clean. Then again this clinic was inside a normal hospital, which was not the rule.

It took about five minutes or so for Heidenstein to return with three empty magazines. "Here."

"Thank you", she replied and took them. "What do I owe you?"

He did not answer immediately and seemed to calculate something in his head. "Let's say 1200 for the pistole and the ammunition and we are even." Once again he smiled at her.

"Okay. Credstick or transaction?"

"I don't care", he replied. "Whatever you prefer."

"Then transaction", she muttered and got out her commlink. "I am almost out of credsticks, thanks to those idiots."

He looked at her. "You are really annoyed by them, hmm?"

"You don't say", she muttered and finally sat down on the stretcher. "And you cannot tell me you are not."

Heidenstein shrugged, his smile a bit fainter then before. "Well, they are not the most reasonable...", he then admitted.

"Do you really plan on staying with them?"

"Herr Schmidt still wants them to be the B-Team for his big run. And they need to be ready till then."

Pakhet sighed. "Are they ever going to be ready?", she asked.

"We'll see", Heidenstein just answered.

"Sure." She shook her head, because she really did not believe it. Those idiots would probably get killed before whatever "big thing" Schmidt had planned would start. For a moment she paused. She felt the urge to warn Heidenstein to not keep with that group. But once again she reminded herself, that it was not her problem. "Well, I am glad I don't need to deal with them anymore."

Heidenstein looked at her, nodded, but said nothing to it.

After a while the following silence became awkward and Pakhet jumped back onto her legs. "I'll be going."

"Alright", he replied and offered her his hand. "Just call me, if you need more narcoject darts, okay?"

She nodded. "Thanks."

Once again the following days were uneventful. So uneventful that Pakhet finally pressured Michael to pay her for some work, like guarding his shop and running some errands, as she needed money. Like that she passed another five days, doing mostly dull work for Michael.

It was on the morning of the sixth day, that once again her comlink started to ring early in the morning. When she looked at it, the caller's number was unknown to her. She hesitated, but finally picked up. "Yes?"

"Pakhet?", a voice asked.

"Yes", she replied warily.

"Here is Kah Pak", the voice replied.

Unbelievably Pakhet looked at her commlink. He should not have her number. For a second she was tempted to hang up, but she did not. "How did you get my number?"

"Dacart gave it to me."

Silently she cursed the adept. Was it not another general rule to not hand on others' numbers? "And what do you want?", she asked with anger in her voice.

"A friend's friend needs help", the elf replied.

"I don't care", she said, ready to hang up.

"His daughter has been kidnapped", added Kah Pak.

At that Pakhet cursed.

VIII - Protection racket

It was around noon when Pakhet arrived at the address Kah Pak had given her. She was cursing herself, while pulling up with the Jack Rabbit, additionally to Dacart and Kah Pak and she promised herself to strangle that fucking grinning idiot of an adept the next time she saw him – just before reminding herself that she actually did not plan on seeing him again. Such a god damn fool!

It was a street in the south-east of Stormann, where several smaller shops occupied the houses to the right. The shop she was looking for was called *Fai Congs fernöstliche Taliskrämerei* and it looked more like one of those mythical Chinese medicine shop, as they had been depicted in different movies throughout the years. In those movies a misguided character would come in, talk to the most stereotypic depiction of an old Chinese guy and then some magic would happen to him, which would then often be the plot hook for the entire movie.

Thankfully Pakhet was pretty sure no such magic incident would happen to her here – even though in this case Fai Cong was probably indeed a practician mage. Well, and normally real magic was not used to bring misguided people back on the right path, but rather to kill.

In front of the shop two people seemed to be waiting: Kah Pak and Baramaus.

“Oh drek”, she muttered, when she realized that was probably everyone. Was she really to get stuck only with those two? Fuck, why had Kah Pak even phoned her? He seemed to not been to keen on working with her and if he was not totally dumb he would have noticed that she was not very found of him of anyone else of the group.

She would have turned around, but if Kah Pak had not lied before, there maybe was the life of a young girl on the line and she just could not turn away from that.

The street was in one of those areas of Hamburg, where some very old buildings were standing next to brand new ones, making the line-up look somewhat messed up. The Chinese talismonger shop was fittingly located in an old house build from crumbling red bricks. There were different artefacts – probably magic – sitting in the shopwindow. When she got out of the car, she could see some knives, some pottery and feathers, bits of fur and some herbs.

“So, this is the shop?”, she asked without saying hallo or anything.

“Yes”, Kah Pak answered. “It belongs to a friend of my talismonger.”

“And his daughter was kidnapped?”

“Yes. From all I know.” Kah Pak's voice was once again calm.

Baramaus made an annoyed sound. “Can't we just take care of it?”

Yeah, Pakhet thought, she really should strangle him sooner or later.

But Kah Pak nodded. "Let's go inside", he said and turned around.

As she wanted to know what exactly was going on, Pakhet did not say anything and just followed him, when he went into the shop.

Inside there was the strong smell of incense, mixed with some other herbs it seemed. The entire shop looked very cliché – though others might have called it "authentic". The entire walls were covered with wooden shelves filled with small drawers labelled in Chinese. There were also several vitrines standing in the room their glass fronts dusty, filled with all sorts of artefacts. There was a Chinese man standing behind a counter with an old cash-register on it. Old in this case meant really old, as the register seemed to be at least 150 years old or at least be made in such a way.

"Hello", Kah Pak started unsure. "You are Mr. Cong?"

The Chinese man was hard to put age wise. His face seemed immensely tired, but not really old, while there were already thick white streaks in his short black hair. He nodded. "Yes. Does this mean you are the one sent over?"

"About your daughter, yes", Kah Pak replied.

There was relief appearing on the man's face. "Oh, thank the gods. Finally."

Pakhet cleared her throat and stepped forward a bit. "Could you tell us, what happened."

"It is the mafia", the Chinese man said. He looked beaten. "They take protection money from everyone on the street. But this shop... It doesn't make much revenue... And I have been falling behind and so they took my daughter, my dear Huan, so I would pay. But I *don't have* the money."

Both Pakhet and Kah Pak had a question, but it was Baramus who in before they could properly start talking: "What do you mean, you have no money? Does it mean you cannot pay us?"

The man looked sad. "Well, I can offer you one thousand. But that is really everything."

"A thousand for each of us?", Baramus pressed, but the man shook his head.

"Sorry, pal", the mage exclaimed, "but we don't work for that little m..." It was then that Pakhet lay her hand on his shoulder and shoved him aside.

"Shut up", she whispered. "Just shut up." Then she turned at Mr. Cong. "What mafia?" She did not know about the Vory being active in Stormann, so it confused her. This was not even Likedeeler turf.

"The Italians", Mr. Cong said.

Pakhet raised an eyebrow and looked over to Kah Pak and Baramaus. While Kah Pak looked a bit confused, Baramaus was just pouting again. But from all she knew, the Cosa Nostra was not really active in Hamburg. She did not say anything, but made a mental note to ask Michael about it later on.

"When did they take your daughter?" Kah Pak seemed to at least try to be empathic.

"Three days ago", the talismonger answered. "And there is something else..." He was hesitating. "You see, those Mafia guys have a cigar cutter and just this morning... My daughters finger..."

Pakhet swallowed. She felt pity for the girl who probably had nothing to do with anything. "How much do they want?"

"Ten thousand..." The man's voice was shaking.

This time Pakhet exchanged gazes with Kah Pak and was glad, that he, too, seemed to be content to take this run. Who cared about Baramaus?

"Do you have any clue, where your daughter might be?", Kah Pak finally asked.

Mr. Cong seemed to think about this for a moment. "Well, the Mafia owns a fastfood store down the street... Maybe you find somebody there, who knows something."

Kah Pak nodded. "Alright. We'll see, what we can do."

"But...", Baramaus started, but Pakhet shoved him out the shop.

"Thank you", the man said. "Thank you so much."

They left the shop, just for Baramaus to once again start to protest just when they were outside: "We don't work for one thousand! That's barely more than three hundred for each of us!"

Pakhet gave an annoyed snort. "If it makes you feel better, I'll pass on the payment, okay? Then it five hundred for each of you!"

"That is still too little!", Baramaus exclaimed.

"Calm down", Kah Pak said quietly. "Let's go at that fastfood shop and look into what is going on, alright? Maybe there is an easy way to solve this."

"Whatever", the mage muttered.

The fastfood restaurant Mr. Chang had told them about turned out to be a small filial

of one of the newer soyfood-only chains that had started to appear all over the western hemisphere during the last 20 years or so. Of course, McDonald's and its kindred mostly served soyfood, too, but if you paid extra (meaning tenfold) you often were able to order real beef and chips made from real potatoes. But not so with those new chains was McHugh's – named in a way, that was entirely not to mimic the older companies name.

They were known for the huge amount of fat they used to fry their food – and they tended to fry almost everything on their menu. Burgers, chips, everything.

This particular store was situated in one of those standard fastfood squareblocks. It was a low building, seemingly a bit older. Maybe it had hosted another fastfood chain before. The half, in which the dining area was located had wide glass fronts and you could see from the outside, that the tables and small round chairs were fixed to the ground. The back half of the building was made of concrete, probably housing the kitchen, some sort of office and a storage room.

Pakhet had left her car in front of the talismonger shop, as this was just down the street.

“Well, let's do this”, Pakhet said and made two steps, but while Kah Pak followed her, Baramus stood still.

“Wait a moment”, he suddenly said. “Just wait. I'll make a short phone call.”

Raising an eyebrow Pakhet looked at him, but he did not elaborate. He just put some distance between them and himself and got out his comlink. Then he went into the space between two of the buildings and while they could hear single words, they could not really make sense of what he said. There were words like: “Need a name” and “make it up”, but that was the gist of it. Then after maybe two minutes he came back to them saying nothing.

“Can we go now?”, Kah Pak asked and seemed a bit on edge.

Pakhet nodded. “Only waiting for Baramus.”

“We can go”, Baramus said shrugging.

And so they went. The entry to the restaurant was at the side of the building and not directly facing the street. As it was the standard these days there was a metal detector and a security guard – a young girl at the beginning of her twenties, the chestnut brown hair bound into a pigtail – standing next to it. Of course the detector went of, as soon as Pakhet went through it.

“Wait a moment”, the girl said. “Weapons are not allowed in here.”

Pakhet sighed and looked at her. She raised her hands and showed the cyber-pistols. “It is hard to detach these”, she replied. “Please, I work as a security guard, too.” To show her, she showed her full SIN, which identified her once again as a private

security guard. "And I just want to have some lunch."

The young guard looked at her with a faint smile. "It's alright", she said. "Come in."

Thankful Pakhet nodded at her and followed Kah Pak and Baramesus, though she indeed got herself something to eat to not proof her words obvious lies. So she soon had a burger and some fries, both smelling of fat, on a tray in front of her.

The dining area was half empty. There was a man sitting there, seemingly reading a book, there was an old man with a young child, and several people, that looked like some wageslaves eating lunch.

Baramesus meanwhile went straight for a obese man, sitting on one of the tables. He had black, greasy hair and was eating fries, while typing something into a comlink with his left hand. The man was so fat, that one could not wonder how he was able to move. Still he was wearing a suit, even though it was riddled with stains.

Baramesus, who wore a good, expensive looking suit himself, took place across the table from him, while Kah Pak sat down on the next table after a moment of hesitation.

With a sigh Pakhet went to the table Kah Pak was sitting at, but faced the obese man. She took one of the soyfries and regretted it instantly. It was sickeningly oily.

"You are Mr. Caivano, right?", Baramesus asked.

"Who is asking?", the man replied, without looking up from his comlink.

"We came from Mr. Cong", Baramesus replied making Pakhet to want to bang her head against the table. Was he unable to be subtle?

But for now Mr. Caivano just looked up and got out a small book. "Then you are here to pay for him?"

"No", Baramesus replied. "We are here to talk to you. You have taken his daughter, right?"

Caivano shook his head, browsed through his book and showed one of the pages to Baramesus. "Look. He has not paid us in five month. We allow him to conduct business on our turf and he has to pay us for it."

"Well, he does not have the money", the mage replied with a bit of anger in his voice.

Once again Caivano shook his head. "That is not our problem", he just said. "If we leave him of the hook, the next guy will expect the same treatment." He spoke in a matter-of-factly manner, as if he was explaining it to a five-year-old.

"I understand that", Baramesus pressed on. "But the guy does not have the money. What is he supposed to do."

"That is not my problem. You can pay for him, if you want."

It was clear from his body language that Baramaus started to get angry. "Don't mess with me like that. You cut off the girl's finger!"

"Yes, and we'll cut off more of her fingers, if he does not pay soon", the mafioso replied, his voice now strident. "If you are not going to pay for him, just go back to him and tell him, that he should pay soon. And don't come back without the money, understood?" He was rather good in making the threat audible without being too direct.

"Don't talk to me like that", Baramaus started and got up, when Pakhet stood up, too, and laid her hand on his shoulder. She had noticed several men in the room, as well as the guard, looking at them and some seemed to have their hands on guns.

"Let's go", she said, her voice resolute.

"But...", began Baramaus.

"Let's go", she repeated and more or less dragged him out of the restaurant.

When she passed the guard she had a weird feeling for a moment. She thought that the girls tried to make eye contact, but when she looked at her, the girl looked away.

Pakhet did not think too much of it – mostly because she was still busy dragging the mage along. Also she was thinking about what other approaches they could take. After all this really was not the team she would have picked to have a gun-fight with the Mafia. Till now she had not seen either of them do anything useful. She still regretted to have allowed Baramaus to speak.

"Why did you get me out?", Baramaus screamed, when they were back on the street.

"Because you'd nearly had get us shot, you moron!", she shouted back at him. "Can't you control your temper at all?!"

"You cannot lecture me! You've no right!", the mage yelled.

Pakhet snorted. "Well, your temper might have gotten the girl killed."

Once more Baramaus muttered something under his breath, but did not reply outright, before Kah Pak came out after them and looked at them.

"So... What now?", he asked.

"Let's go back to Cong", Baramaus said snidely.

"To do what?", Pakhet replied.

The mage looked at her defiantly. "Talk to him about money."

She really could not believe him. Of course it more the rule than the exception that runners were more out for their own wealth and did not care about others, but was it so hard to understand, that this was all the man was able to offer? "And to what end? Don't you think he would have paid the Mafia, if he had the money?"

"I don't care", he muttered. "Let's just go."

And because Kah Pak did not object they returned, even though Pakhet did not like it. If she had had any back up, anyone else who was with them, she would have just asked him to accompany her, while ending this without the two awakened. But this way she really did not know what else to do. She was good, but she really not want to take the risk of going up to several Mafiosi on their hometurf alone.

"I'll make a phone call", she said, when she reached the talismonger shop again and opened her car, to get inside.

If the two of them wanted to press the poor man for more money, she did not want to have any part in it. A part of her wanted to stop them, but then again she did not want to argue even more. Maybe, she told herself, Baramus calmed down, if he talked with Cong again. She did not really believe that, but still she managed to calm herself down.

From outside the car she looked over at the shop, but then just got out the commlink to call Michael.

This time he picked up rather quickly. "Oh hey, Pakhet", he greeted her, apparently having recognized her number. "What's up?"

"The Cosa Nostra in Hamburg, what do you know?", she asked.

"I am not sure what I know", he said innocently and it was clear that he wanted money.

Once more she snorted. "I am just asking for general information."

"Well, what about general payment?", he replied.

"Fifty, cannot give you more."

There was a short silence at the end of the line. "Well, they are not strong, but they have some business here. Try to stay as far out of Vory territory as it is possible in this city. That's about it. Why?"

"Some problem with Cosa Nosta in Stormann", she replied. "Thank you."

"Don't forget about the money", he purred.

"Of course." She hung up and gave another sigh, before looking over to the shop.

Even though she could not hear them, it was clear that Baramus was arguing with

Mr. Cong. Then he just opened one of the glass cabinets and took something out. It was clear what was going on: They were trying to get some of the items as payment.

"Fucking idiots", Pakhet muttered and got out of the car. She hurried over to the shop and opened the door. "Stop, you two!"

"No", Mr. Cheng said. "It is okay."

Pakhet looked at him. "No, it is not." Angrily she glanced at Baramaus. "Now come."

For a moment she thought that Baramaus was going to argue back, but in the end he snorted and then just left the shop, stomping angrily.

Kah Pak shrugged. "Alright", he said, before turning around to Mr. Cong. "I am sorry."

"What about my daughter?", the talismonger asked.

"We'll try to find a solution", Pakhet reassured him – even though she really was not sure how to go about this. "I'll tell you, if we make any progress."

With tiredness in his eyes he just nodded and she turned around to follow Kah Pak and Baramaus outside.

The later was already waiting for her. "I hope for you, that you have a pretty good plan!"

"Well, you two are magic", she said. "Can't you find out, where the girl is? We find her and bust her out."

"Sure, with all the Mafia guys around?" Challenging Baramaus looked at her.

"Maybe they held her somewhere without that many guards", she replied. "And at night there tend to be less guards anyway. First we need to find out, where she is anyway."

For a moment there was silence. But much to Pakhet's surprise it was Kah Pak that answered: "Maybe I have a way to find her. I could try to summon a spirit and ask it to see whether she is in that restaurant and if not ask it to follow Caivano. Maybe we can find her that way. Otherwise we might have to ask Mr. Cong for something like a hair of hers to make it easier to find her from the astral plane."

While Pakhet did know, there was something like an astral plane, she did not understand any of it and just nodded. "Okay. Well. Let's try that."

"Whatever..." Baramaus muttered.

Soon they found themselves in somebodies small front yard, where Kah Pak knelt

down next to a thorny bush and closed his eyes. "I'll go into astral space and accompany the spirit. You'll have to take care of my body in the meantime."

"Okay", Pakhet just said, while Baramaus just leaned against the small wall that separated the yard from the street, arms crossed in front of his chest.

Kah Pak closed his eyes and Pakhet could see that his body went numb, which looked rather uncanny. But she knew that it was because his spirit – or whatever mages called it – had somehow left his body to look around in some kind of metaplain. Instead of paying it too much mind, she just eyed up and down the street, but while some people looked at them, nobody did anything against them.

In the end she was rather thankful, that apparently the house owners were not home or did not care that the three of them were sitting in this yard.

While nothing happened it was only a few minutes, until Baramaus comlink started to ring. He picked up and started to talk to somebody. This time Pakhet could hear, what he was saying: "Yes. That was me." – "I am sorry. I did not..." – "Yes. I am sorry." – "No, I won't." – "Yes, for sure." – "Thank you." – "Good bye." Much to her surprise his temper did not rise during that conversation or at least he managed to keep it in check. And it seemed from the long pauses he made between talking, that whoever he had been talking to had given him quite a sermon.

Pakhet said nothing to it, but looked at Kah Pak until he woke up after a few minutes. He took a few deep breaths until he started to speak: "The girl is actually in there", he said. "In a office behind the restaurant. She is guarded by at least two guys. I cannot say how many of the other people work with the Mafia. In total there are eighteen people in that restaurant right now, but I think most of them are civilians."

"Okay", Pakhet said and thought about it.

"Maybe we can take a look, how many guards we can see", Baramaus said impatiently. "It is still day. Considering that HanSec will look over... Though I have to say one thing: I won't go in there again."

"It is not like you are much of an asset", Pakhet muttered.

"You haven't done anything so far", Baramaus snarled at her.

"Like you haven't done anything during like the last few runs", she countered and then shook her head. "Well, let's go over again."

"Whatever", Baramaus once again said.

Kah Pak nodded and stood up, so they could go down to the restaurant. They were two blocks away right then but it did not take them long to return to the right street, where Baramaus started to get rid of the Jacket of his suit.

"What are you doing?", Kah Pak asked before Pakhet could make a comment about it.

"This suit is pretty noticeable", the mage explained himself. "I'm just going down the street and will use magic. I need to try something. And this way I might be able to find out how many guards are in there."

For a moment Pakhet wanted to say something, but then she stayed silent. She did not think this was a good plan, but as long as nobody noticed that the idiotic mage used magic on them, she did not think anything would happen.

Well, she was wrong.

Baramesus, now only wearing a T-Shirt he had been wearing underneath, tried his best to look inconspicuous, while going down the street and did a horrible job at it. The gazes he threw over to the restaurant were just too easy to notice. She would have thought those Mafiosi would be angry about it and tell him to get the fuck away, but she was wrong: Two guys came running out of the restaurant, screamed something and then started shooting.

She cursed, before putting on the helmet she had been carrying around the entire time and running for one of the cars parked on the side of the street opposite to the restaurant and took cover behind the vehicle.

By now there were three people in front of the restaurant – one of them being the guard she had already met at noon. But she did not think about it then but rather started shooting herself using the cyber-pistol in her left hand.

She hit one of the Mafiosi in the shoulder and he fell over onto his back.

Still the guard girl and the other guy ignored her but kept shooting at Baramesus, who seemingly was not yet hit. But it was in that moment that he gave a short scream before hurrying into the next alleyway to take cover behind a trashcan. The girl and the second Mafiosi – a young man with brown hair – followed him, running over the street.

By now there were people running out of the restaurant screaming or had taken cover behind chairs and tables inside, while the people on the street were running away and screaming. One would think that in a city like this they would have grown accustomed to shoot-outs.

Pakhet wanted to shoot at the other guy, when the door opened and another younger man ran outside followed by Caivano – both with pistols drawn. Caivano saw her and started firing at her, even though he was apparently not a good shot.

"Can't you use a bigger calibre?", a voice asked next to her. It was Kah Pak who had gone for the same cover.

"Just shut up", she replied, aimed for Caivano's shoulder and shot. As it had been with the guy before the bullet hit the target and threw the man onto his back, where he kept lying, apparently unable to bring his massive body back onto his feet.

Pakhet saw how the guy who had ran for Baramesus jerked for a moment and understood that it had probably been magic. She shook her head and fired another bullet, this time aiming for the guys ankle and once again managed for him to fall over.

Now another man came out of the restaurant. He wore a well armoured suit and looked around bewildered. He shouted something in Italian, so Pakhet could not understand. But she did not care. Another bullet to the shoulder, another guy fell over, leaving only one of the young man and the guard standing.

Carefully Pakhet stood up a bit. "If you give up, I won't hurt you further!", she yelled over.

The girl looked over to her, then fell to her knees and carefully laid down her pistole before holding up her hands.

The guy hesitated for a moment, but then did the same.

Pakhet sighed and lowered her arm. Just in that moment a man came out of the building, went over to the man that had exited the building last and got out a pistole. Pakhet remembered the man: He had been sitting right next to the door when they had been there before. Once again she raised her arm, but the man just shot the other man on the floor into the head before running away, letting go of his pistole on the way.

For a moment she was puzzled but then she remembered that there were more important things at hand.

She had not planned on killing any of the Mafiosi – as living enemies tended to be able to answer question. As Caivano seemed to be the highest up from the people around them, she went over to him first.

"Okay, let's talk again", she said.

"I'll do anything", the man whimpered. "Just make sure I survive."

"Sure", she replied, knowing well that his obesity was more likely to kill him then the bullet in his shoulder. But if it meant getting the girl out without any more complications she could easily do some first help.

She wanted to get her med-kit out of her backpack, when the bang of a gunshot made her jerk. It took her a moment to realize, that somebody had shot Caivano right into the head. That somebody had to be standing right behind her.

She turned around to see Baramesus who had taken up one of the pistols from the knocked out Mafiosi. His eyes were cold.

"What did you do that for?", she yelled at him. "He was going to collaborate!"

"I cannot keep anyone alive", he whispered and turned around towards the girl, who still held her hands up.

"Don't do that!", Pakhet said slowly, quickly thinking about what she could do. Of course she could just shoot him, but she really did not want to get that kind of reputation, even though she right now would have enjoyed killing him. Then again tackling him with her arms would take too long and she was not sure whether she would be able to control herself enough to not kill him like that.

"Don't!", she repeated when she saw him hesitate at least. Still his finger was on the trigger, ready to pull. It was then that her hand found the gun Heidenstein had given her. Narcoject! Of course!

His finger tensed up, but she was quicker. She pulled the dart pistol and shot, positioning the dart right at his neck. Quickly he turned around to her, but he had not even the time to realize what had happened before falling down onto the street.

Pakhet looked at the guard girl and saw tears in her eyes. "Run", she whispered and the girl jumped up to run.

IX – A helping hand

Somehow they reached the talismonger shop before HanSec was even at the scene. While Kah Pak was carrying the dazed girl on his back, a Chinese teen, Pakhet was giving Baramus the fireman's lift. She was thankful, that the girl did not cry, because she was not good with this kind of stuff.

Her right hand was in bloody bandages, but Kah Pak had reassured her, that the finger could be easily reattached using magic. As she did not know much about magical healing, she had no choice but to believe him.

Mr. Cong came running towards them, once he spotted them through the window. "Huan!", he shouted and ran towards Kah Pak, who let the girl down.

The girl could at least stand on her feet and apart from the missing finger actually seemed to be healthy. Without a word she threw her arms around her fathers neck and just pressed herself against him.

"Huan! Huan!", Mr. Cong whispered, stroking the girls hair.

Not wanting to disturb the family reunion Pakhet just fumbled the comlink out of her pocket and opened the Jack Rabbit's trunk to throw Baramus inside. For a moment she considered to just throw the tailgate closed, but she sat down and brought him into a stable position. His breath was shallow and his pulse very irregular and slow. There were also two minor gun injuries that were bleeding, though they seemed to be grazes.

Finally Mr. Cong let go of his daughter, though he left an arm around her. "Is he alright?"

Pakhet suppressed a snort. "He'll be alright", she said, though she really was not sure. "He is just sleeping." She closed the tailgate and went over to Mr. Cong. "I don't think the Mafia will bother you again. If they do, just give us a call, okay?"

"Thank you", the man whispered. "Wait a moment, I'll get..."

Pakhet shook her head. "It's alright", she said. "Don't bother about the payment." She looked over to Kah Pak, almost waiting for him to argue about it, but he did not. They had taken all the money from the Mafiosi after all – even though it had not been that much, it was more then the one thousand the man had offered.

"But I need to...", started Mr. Cong.

"It's alright", Pakhet said and went for the car door.

Kah Pak just nodded.

There were sirens in the distance – apparently HanSec finally showing up at the scene. Maybe they had been paid by the Mafia to respond late if something was to happen at that restaurant. Well, all they would find now were several dead or unconscious Mafiosi.

"I'll be going", Pakhet said to Kah Pak. "I'll bring Baramus to the doc."

"I should be going, too", the shaman replied with a nod.

"Is there really nothing, I...", Mr. Cong began over again.

"It is alright", Pakhet replied before getting into the car. "Take care of your daughter." And with that she shut the door and started the car.

Thankfully she did not meet any HanSec patrol – after all she was not keen on explaining the unconscious body she was driving around in her trunk. Still she drove very carefully to not risk anything and parked at the site of the street and got out the comlink again to dial the number of Heidenstein.

It took him a couple of rings to pick up the phone – time Pakhet spend drumming her finger on the steering wheel.

"Heidenstein here", his voice finally said.

"Hey doc", she said with a sigh of relief. "Pakhet here. I kinda need your help right now." She almost envisaged to get scolded for using the narcoject even though she had known that he had been at least a bit ailing.

"Not a good time", Heidenstein replied. "I'm busy."

Pakhet pursed her lips. "Well, it is kinda an emergency."

Now it was Heidenstein who gave a sigh. "What happened?"

"Well", she said a bit hesitant. "I might have accidentally almost killed Baramesus..."

For a moment the doc was silent. "What ha...", he began, but then shopped short.

"Come to the hospital. But come through the back door, okay?"

"Sure. Thanks." And with that she hung up and hurried up. Without any further ado she started the car again and drove towards Bergedorf. It was only early afternoon and there were quite a few people outside, even though she – once again – found the parking lot in front of the hospital almost empty.

As she was not keen to once again carry around an unconscious body, she drove around the hospital towards what seemed to be the backdoor. Here, too, two shady guys – one being an ork, the other a rather young human – were standing in front of a plain, white double door.

In front of this she parked the car and got Baramesus out of her trunk. He was still alive. Great.

"I need to go to Heidenstein", she said to the shady guards. "He knows I am coming."

Neither of them said anything, but they did not stop her when she carried Baramesus through the double door. Having at least a rough idea, what the architecture should look like she followed the corridor she found herself on the corridor on which the treatment room she had been in the other day was located.

"Doc?", she yelled into the silence. "Heidenstein?"

One of the doors opened and Heidenstein came out. He shot Baramesus one look, before saying: "Follow me." Once again he guided her to the treatment room, where she thankfully laid the mage down onto a stretcher.

"What has happened?", Heidenstein asked, while starting to examine Baramesus. He felt the mage's pulse and checked his eye movement, before connecting him to an biomonitor.

Pakhet gave a long sigh and leaned against the desk. "Well, I got myself talked into helping Kah Pak out. He had been asked to return a girl. The daughter of a talismonger. She had been kidnapped by the Mafia – the Italian Mafia. Well, long story short: Baramesus pissed them off, there was a shoot-out, they gave up. Then Baramesus wanted to shoot them. Well, he shot one of them. And before he could shoot somebody else, I narcojected him... And he might have been a bit ailing."

"I warned you about that", Heidenstein said. By now he had gotten out a syringe and taken some blood. "Narcoject is a strong drug."

"It is not as if I had much of a choice", Pakhet replied defensive.

Heidenstein did not reply immediately, as he was browsing through the medicine cabinet. He seemed to be thinking about something, but finally got out a small flask and filled up a syringe with the liquid inside. "This will stabilize him." He gave the mage the injection.

"I would not just wake him up", Pakhet said carefully.

"It won't", Heidenstein replied. "It will just stabilize him."

Pakhet was silent and just watched, when he set an infusion and hang the back up on an I.V. pole. When the cardiogram finally normalized Heidenstein's posture noticeable relaxed and turned around.

"Look. I can understand, why you have done it, and I would have probably done the same", he said. "Just be careful with narcoject. It is a strong drug."

Pakher rolled her eyes. "I understand that. As I said: I had to act fast."

For a moment Heidenstein looked at her, but then he nodded and gave her a short smile. "I understand."

There was silence and Pakhet once again looked over to Baramesus. If it was going to be anything like with Winter before, he would be unconscious for at least a few hours. And she was sure, that he would be angry, once he was awake. "So... What are we going to do about him?"

Heidenstein, too, looked over to the mage. "We could bring him into some empty room, bind him to a stretcher and then wake him up?", he suggested. "If he throws a tantrum, I will just anaesthetise him again."

For a moment Pakhet was not sure. Would binding him up hinder Baramesus' magic? She rather would not try out, but she knew that he would have to wake up eventually. "I'll take care of the gazes first", Heidenstein said, when she did not reply.

Pakhet gave a sigh. "Alright."

About half an hour later they had cuffed the mage to a movable stretcher. They were in an entirely empty room, somewhere on the second floor of the hospital. Heidenstein had put three syringes on a trolley next to the stretcher. Pakhet knew, that one of them had to be filled with the antidote to the narcoject, while another probably was filled with some anaesthetic. She had no idea about the third syringe, but also did not ask. The biomonitor was also on the trolley and still showed a regular cardiogram.

Pakhet had crossed her arms in front of her chest and looked at the unconscious mage. A part of her regretted to not have just shot him outright.

"Let's do this", Heidenstein said with way more optimism then she felt. He took one of the syringes and injected its contents through the portacath.

It took a minute or two, until Baramesus' eyelids started to flicker. He threw his head from one side to the other, moaning and then opened his eyes. His eye movement was erratic and it took quite a while, before he was able to focus.

He tried to say something – and there was anger in his voice – but his words came out so vague, that Pakhet could not understand. He gulped a couple of time, before he was finally able to speak properly.

"You bitch!", he started, gulped again, and continued: "Why did you do that?"

"Because you would have killed innocents", she replied with cool voice.

"They were not innocent!", he yelled, his speech still a bit slurred. "They were with the Mafia! You fucking bitch don't know, what you've done!" He tried to break loose from the handcuffs but was unable to. "When I get out of here, I'll..."

Heidenstein sighed and got one of the other syringes from the trolley. "Well, that's it..."

"What... What are you doing?", Baramesus asked, when the doc attached the syringe to the portacath.

"Putting you back to sleep", the doc replied with a calm voice. "I won't let you threaten anybody here."

"I am not threatening anybody!", Baramesus protested.

Pakhet raised an eyebrow and looked at him. "Sure..."

It looked like Baramesus was going to continue his tantrum, but then he took a deep breath. "I won't threaten anyone, okay, doc?", he then said, his voice much calmer. Heidenstein looked at him for a moment, but then distached the syringe, though he kept it in his hand.

"I am sorry, okay?", Baramesus said. "Okay... Okay..." For a while he was silent. He closed his eyes. "Okay", he then repeated once again. "I ran a way from a corp, okay? When I came to Hamburg, one of the dons took me in. I worked for him and the Mafia. When they find out, I was involved in the shooting, they'll kill me! And now those people are alive, they will tell! They will find out!" With every word there was more anger and more panic in his voice.

Pakhet looked at him for the span of a few seconds, pondering about whether he was telling the truth. She exchanged gazes with Heidenstein. If Baramesus was telling the truth, she could somehow understand why he had tried to kill them, but it did not change, she could not allow him to run around like a loose cannon. "Baramesus, I am sorry, but I cannot have something like that happen again."

"Well, you never wanted to come with us in the first place!", the mage bawled her out.

"True", she admitted, when Heidenstein interrupted them for the first time:

"I won't allow it either", he said matter-of-factly.

It seemed as if Baramesus wanted to bawl him out, too, but he grasped a hold of himself and stayed silent.

Once more Pakhet pursed her lips. "I'll give you an advice, Baramesus. If you have pissed of your Mafia buddies, just leave the city. Because if they won't kill you, it might be me who will." For a moment she shot Heidenstein another gaze. While he did not say anything, it was clear from his expression, that he did not like her threatening the mage.

"And where do you think I should go?", Baramesus asked.

Pakhet looked at him. "I don't care", she simply replied.

And like that Baramesus was gone. They let him go from the hospital in the evening and much to Pakhet's surprise he did not try anything funny. He just left and did not bother her again. Some part of her would feel bad about it later on, as she knew very well how desperate some people became after running away from a corp. But randomly killing people would get him killed and whomever he was working with.

"Thank you", she said, while once again sitting in the treatment room of the hospital. Baramesus had only left maybe half an hour ago and somehow she had stayed at the hospital to help the doc clean up, though they had finished rather quickly. Now she sat on the stretcher, while Heidenstein had taken place on the doctor's chair and just had handed her a cup of soykaf.

"Compensation, though it is only soykaf", he replied with a faint smile. Once again she noticed, that he looked pretty tired.

"No", she answered. "For helping out."

He shrugged it off. "It's kinda my job, right? Though I would prefer to work without anyone threatening anyone else."

"Sorry, about that. Just said the truth."

At that he did not reply and took a sip of his soykaf.

Pakhet looked at her cup. She still did not like soykaf, even though it had caffeine, but she would not complain. Out of the corner of her eye she peered over to Heidenstein. Something about him still did not seem right to her, yet she was still sitting here, even

though she could have left when Baramesus had. She was still toying with an idea, though there was a voice in her head warning her it was not a good idea.

After all she had done so very well before to not hang out with other runners – but then again she tended to be annoyed with most other people. Well, she still was unsure, whether Heidenstein annoyed her or not. Still, he was a doctor, he had sold her the narcoject cheaper than she would have been able to get it otherwise and he seemed to have wide knowledge.

She sighed. "Say, Doc, you said you modified your Parashield pistole yourself, right?"

His smile became a bit smug. "Yes. Why?"

"How about compensation for the mechanic course?", she suggested.

It seemed as if he had to consider for a moment. "Why not? Not as compensation, but fine by me." He paused for a moment. "Though I've got to admit, I am surprised. You have not learned it before?"

She just shrugged. "I know the basics. But I have Michael – I know him for so long..."

Once again she shrugged. "I know how to fix weapons. I know how to assemble and reassemble rifles. But for everything else I have Michael."

"Michael, whom you cannot trust", Heidenstein replied amused.

Pakhet gave a short smirk and took another sip from the soykaf. "Exactly. In battle I would not use a weapon he sold me, without having tested it in any possible way."

At that he started laughing, nearly choking on his soykaf. "Any possible way?", he echoed suggestively.

It took her a moment to understand what he was meant and growled. "Very funny", she replied snappily. "To everyone his own, but I am not suicidal."

Heidenstein, who was still chuckling, shook his head. "Sorry." Somehow the apology did not feel sincere, mostly because his voice still seemed amused.

Still grumbling to herself Pakhet did not reply, but just took another sip of soykaf. Something told her, that she should just drink up and go and this time she absolutely agreed. So she hurried up to empty the cup. "Do you have a workshop for weapons?"

Heidenstein paused for a second, before giving her an apologetic smile. "I am afraid no. At least not in the moment."

How was it, that she had almost guessed this? Pakhet sighed. "I'll ask Michael whether we can use his workshop."

"Michael, eh?", he asked, once again raising an eyebrow.

"Yes", she said and stood up. "Believe me, it is better to keep an eye on him."

In the end they spend the following three afternoons in the workshop located underneath Michael's weapons shop. While Michael had been hesitant to let them use it, he finally had agreed to leave it to them and allow them to overhaul some of the "used ware" he had gotten in.

To some degree Pakhet was glad that she was able to pick up the craft rather quickly, as Heidenstein's quick speed with the mechanics had somewhat annoyed her. And she was thankful, that the doc did not try any more inappropriate jokes, so she was unsure whether it was because of her reaction or because that kind of jokes were more of a rarity with him.

These afternoons helped her to not think about Baramesus and what had happened in front of that McHugh's as her mind was too busy processing the new information. Still there was a voice in her head during those days being unhappy with the information. Because no matter how hard she tried to pass this off as "learning" it had an awful lot of qualities identifying it as "hanging out socially" – and after all she had done so well

so far to never to this.

The worst part of this was, that Michael noticed the same. Just on the third day, when she arrived at his shop, he looked at her with the same smug expression on his face he tended to wear all the time. "Since when do you spend time with other runners?", he asked while sipping some cheap coffee.

"It is not 'spending time'", she replied and shot him a look. "He just teaches me, because you wouldn't."

Michael shrugged, but seemed to be amused. "I would. Just not for free."

"Well, Heidenstein does it for free", she said.

"And that's exactly, why I don't like him", Michael replied and sat down behind the counter again. "Whatever, Pakhet. But you know: Trust gets you killed."

"That's why I don't trust you", she retorted, making him grin.

"Exactly."

She took the key, he had laid on the counter before, and already went for the basement. With one last gaze shot towards Michael, she opened the door to the old staircase and went downwards.

The basement, which was made up of two rooms, was heavily secured and Pakhet knew that this was less to protect the goods, but rather to be a bunker for himself, if once again somebody tried to kill him. Michael really had a good hand making friends. The walls of both rooms were heavily reinforced and covered with black tiles, that on one hand were able to soak explosive blasts without reflecting too much of the force, while on the other also dampening all WiFi signals, making it harder or maybe even impossible to hack anything down here. One of the rooms was lined with shelves containing tools and some weapons, while a bigger work bench was standing right at the left side. The other room – Pakhet knew – contained crates with weapons, but some necessities to live in there was well. The key Michael had given her only lead into the first room, as the other room was locked behind several locks of different kinds. It was his safe-heaven after all.

She took one of the weapons from a shelf, as she knew it was left there by Michael for her and Heidenstein to work on. And as Heidenstein was not there yet, she started to work by herself. All the weapons needed a new RFID-chip so she started with replacing it.

After not even ten minutes he arrived – she heard his steps on the stairs and looked up, when he entered the room. No matter what Michael said: She did not trust Heidenstein more than him or anybody else.

"What is wrong with your friend up there?", he asked when sitting down.

"Hmm?" She started to work on the gun again.

"He said something... Weird", Heidenstein replied and seemed genuinely puzzled about that. For a moment it seemed as if he wanted to add something of further detail, but then he restrained himself from doing so, even though Pakhet had a good idea, what Michael would have said.

"He is disillusional", she just muttered.

"Okay", Heidenstein slowly answered. When she looked up, she could see that he had once again raised an eyebrow.

But they left it at that and once again started to work, though not entirely without occasional banter. If she was honest with herself, she would have had to admit that it was probably that banter she enjoyed most of all. Most of the time Robert was not very good with banter, while she had to be careful about what she said bantering with Michael – as she could be sure that everything she said would be used against her.

And the list of people she spent social time with included the two of them exclusively. Of course she reminded herself that she did not know whether Heidenstein would use anything she said against her – but somehow she tended to remind herself of that too late.

"I still am kinda surprised that neither of those idiots have not been apprehended yet", Pakhet muttered as the talk once again had started to revolve around the team of total idiots – as she had started to call them. "I mean, sure, HanSec is corrupt and maybe not that capable, but..."

"Maybe you underestimate those 'idiots'", Heidenstein commented.

For a moment she paused pointedly as if to think. "No, I don't think so."

"Well, then they maybe have guardian angels of some sort", he replied with a smirk.

"Maybe", Pakhet muttered and laid down the gun, the ID of which she had just replaced. "But I cannot help but wonder whether HanSec really think it was a terrorist attack."

"Probably not", Heidenstein said. "But why let an excuse to do more checks go by?"

Doubtingly Pakhet looked at him. "Because checks of any sort cost money. I understand them doing raids for the next week or so, but by now it should have already cost them quite a sum. Still they left the terror level up."

"Who knows", Heidenstein muttered and took another gun. "Maybe they plan for something big."

At that suggestion Pakhet shrugged and went back to work. "Michael probably knows you have been involved."

"Another warning?"

"No. Just a note."

Heidenstein paused. "Have you told him?"

She looked at him, making sure there was plenty of outrage in her expression. "No. He is just... Good in connecting the dots." For a second she paused. "That how he is. He knew..." She cut her own sentence short, realizing that she had nearly admitted for Michael to be her fixer. "He had a suspicion about the explosion having to do with a run. And I told him when I went on the run. He connected the dots."

It was rather clear from the expression on Heidenstein's face, that he did not entirely believe what she said. "And you don't trust him?"

"No. He would sell me out, if the price was good enough." She sighed. The only reason this had not happened yet was that there never had been any bounty on her head.

"How extremely nice."

"Don't you think?" She shrugged. "The reason why I keep an eye on him."

With the hint of a smirk on his face Heidenstein looked at her, but then continued to work, starting to explain what to pay attention too when fixing a gun's barrel. As he once again started to talk with a stereotypical teacher's voice, Pakhet rolled her eyes, but said nothing.

Some time later it was the ring of Heidenstein's commlink interrupting them. He paused, took out the device and looked at it, before excusing himself: "I'll have to take this. This might be important."

And with that he stood up and left the room – probably because of the bad connection down here.

Pakhet paused, too, unable to help herself she started to listen. When Heidenstein picked up he started with something in Russian but soon enough changed back too German. "When?" – "Sure. I'm on my way." – "Yes, Victor, I'll be there in half an hour." Victor? Russian and Victor? She sure hoped that he had not been talking to Victor

Lobatchevski, because the Lobatchevskis meant bad news.

She heard his steps on the stairs, when he came down again and took his backpack. "I'm sorry", he said. "Something came up. I need to go. We can continue this another time."

Pakhet nodded. "Sure." She hesitated. "Anything I can help with?"

"No", he replied shaking his head. "But thanks for the offer." Getting into his armoured jacket again he left the room and hurried up the stairs.

She looked after him, shrugged and finished the pistol she had been working on before cleaning up and leaving as well. She locked the door behind herself and gave the key back to Michael once she was in the store again.

Michael was laying back in his chair and had his goggles on – probably to read something – but sat up once she entered. "Your friend left rather hastily, eh?"

"He is a doctor. So he probably had an emergency or something", she said. "But I'll be going, too. I don't know whether we'll be back tomorrow."

"Whatever", Michael replied boredly.

"Call me, if you have a job for me, okay?", she then added, before going over to the door.

"Sure", her fixer said and then she left – once again without saying so much as "good-bye".

She was somewhat surprised that it was already sunset, when she left the shop, but drove home with the thought of taking the evening off and just watch some trid. Maybe she could take a bath later, as she had not done so in quite a while. Once in a while even she could use a lazy evening for herself doing absolutely nothing.

But it seemed that this evening was not meant to be one of those. She just had finished eating some soybased dinner, when her commlink once again started ringing. Much to her surprise she saw Heidenstein's number popping up on her AR display. She picked up. "Yes?"

"Good evening", the doc replied. "Heidenstein here."

"You don't say", she muttered before she could grab a hold of herself. "I saw your number."

"Sure", he said, before pausing for a moment. "Say: Is your offer to help still standing?"

Pakhet was thankful she did not use a video feedback as he would have seen surprise on her face. "Well, maybe. Depending on what kind of help."

"I've been hired for a run and I could use some muscle."

She did still remember her hunch from before. If he really had been called by Lobatchevski, she was not sure whether she wanted to be involved in this. "May I ask what kind of run?"

Heidenstein hesitated for a while. "Some girls have been kidnapped from the establishment of somebody I know... I was hired to bring them back. For good payment, too."

Pakhet considered this for a few seconds. Establishment sounded an awful lot like "a whorehouse" and as she knew that many of the girls working in that industry did not do so on their own free will, she was not sure whether "kidnapped" was the right word. Maybe they had run away? Then again maybe they really had been kidnapped and needed help. And she, herself, desperately needed money to pay her next rent.

"Alright", she finally agreed. "Where do I meet you?"

"At the harbour", Heidenstein replied. "You know where the eastern border of the old container port has been?"

Of course she knew, as she had worked in the port before becoming a shadowrunner.

"Yes."

"We'll meet there. I'll send you an arrow", he said in a businesslike tone.

"Okay", she replied and got up.

X – A case of piracy

Forlorn the old port lay in the darkness of the night. What once had been the main reloading for containers in Germany lay mostly beneath meters of dark and probably poisonous water. The black flood had forcefully moved most of the companies once located here into the west of the harbour or over to Stade. The old port lay in darkness and only few of the former port buildings towered over the surface.

There had been an effort in the 2030s and 40s to rebuild the old port – if not for business then for expensive living room, but both the natural conditions and gang activity had stopped those enterprise. The few artificial islands that had been build back then lay as much in ruin as the few buildings from the old harbour that were still standing.

The arrow Heidenstein had sent her pointed to what once had been a parking lot but now was overgrown by grasses that had pushed their way through the asphalt.

When Pakhet arrived on her motorcycle she found Heidenstein already waiting. Like her he had taken his motorcycle. Even though he was leaning against the vehicle he was still wearing his helmet, but he nodded when she arrived.

Pakhet, too, left on the helmet, as she was not keen to end up with a bullet from some small-time crook in her head. Still she opened up her visor for a moment to show her face and allow him to make sure he was her. He did the same. "So, what are we going to do?", she asked.

"Wait", Heidenstein replied and sent her a message via commlink. It was an invitation to link up their devices. Normally she did not like to do anything like that, but as none of her weapons was running wireless it was not that much of an issue so she accepted. "This is better", Heidenstein said, his voice sounding in her in-ear monitor.

"Will be better for stealth", she agreed keeping her voice low as she used a microphone integrated into her helmet.

"Indeed." There was once again a hint of amusement in his voice.

"What are we waiting for?", she asked.

"Some guy my affiliate is going to sent", he explained. "A mage, who will use some rituals to find those girls."

Pakhet hesitated for a moment, as there were two question he had not answered yet. "Are those girls prostitutes?", she finally asked.

Not it was Heidenstein who did not answer instantly. "Well, yes. At least something of that sort. They are escorts, hostesses and, well, prostitutes as well."

Pakhet did not reply to that immediately. She had thought so before and she still had her doubts about whether it was good for the girls to be brought back. But she knew those thoughts were unprofessional and being a shadowrunner in Hamburg it was not the first time she had to do with prostitution. "Do we know that they actually have been kidnapped and did not just... Runaway?"

"Yes", the doc replied. "The club they are from has been raided this afternoon. The guy who did it have shot some guards and some of the girls. But they have taken six." He typed something into his commlink. "I'll send you the files."

A message appeared in her field of vision with different files attached to it. When she opened them she saw brief profiles with pictures of the missing girl. All of them were in their early twenties which was better than Pakhet had expected. She scanned throw them. Most of them seemed to be of eastern European origin or at least their

families were, as according to the profiles four of them had been born in Hamburg.

"Thank you", she said. "And do we know who had taken them?"

"Not exactly", Heidenstein replied. "But there are some clues that it has to do with a group who call themselves the Red Band Pirates. But I don't know much about them, as they only showed up a few month ago. And we don't know for sure, that they have been involved, but some of the surviving guards thinks he has recognized their colours."

"Is that, why we are here?", Pakhet said looking around.

"Exactly."

She scanned the run-down buildings that surrounded them. She had not heard of those self-proclaimed pirates before, but as she tended to stay out of gang business if she was not paid for it it was not that surprising. "What about payment?"

"Rather good", Heidenstein replied. "Ten thousand if we find out where the girls are. Two thousand for each girl we bring back alive and mostly unhurt."

"Wow, that is quite a bit of money", Pakhet muttered. It would definitely solve the problem of her barely having enough to pay the rent.

"It is", Heidenstein said. "I think the woman administering the club actually cares about those girls."

Pakhet just nodded, as she was not so easy to trust into the good of humans.

Instead she once more scanned their environment, without noticing too much. On one hand she did not like in what could be a potential fight with hostages involved, one the other hand it was something that happened all the time. She knew she could deal with it, she just would have preferred to know more about those pirates. Well, first they needed to find the girls.

Finally, after a few minutes, she heard the sound of another motorcycle and in the end somebody drove up to them.

Other then the two of them, who wore full helmets, this guy wore a helmet that did not cover his face at all. When he stopped his motorcycle it became apparent that he was an ork, though he was rather small and skinny for an ork. Even with a clearly armoured jacket he did not really look buff.

"Is one of you Heidenstein?", he asked with a very thick Russian accent.

"That would be me", Heidenstein said once again opening his visor. "This is another runner I asked to come along."

"Pakhet", she introduced herself

The ork, who seemed to be rather young, nodded. "They call me Slove", he said and paused. Then he added: "I was hired to find those girls. Not to free them. Not to fight any pirates. If a fight is going to start, I'll be gone."

Heidenstein gave a short nod and shut his visor again. "Understood."

Slove opened his jacket a bit and a small animal crawled out from underneath to sit on his shoulder. It seemed to be some sort of chameleon. The ork got out a small package from his pocket and took something out of it to give it to the animal. "I have the information about the girls", he then said. "If you don't mind, I will start now."

Somewhat wary of him Pakhet just watched him. After all this was Heidenstein's mission and no matter what he said she did not entirely like it. But she had agreed on it, she needed the money and it would not feel right to leave him on his own right now.

"Alright", Heidenstein agreed and nodded at the ork.

"If you don't mind, I will need some distance to properly concentrate", Slove then said and when neither of them objected, she took something out of his motorcycle and

moved away from them for a while, going for a small alleyway next to the parking lot. Pakhet leaned against one of the trees sitting at the side of the parking space to keep an eye onto the opening of the alleyway. After all there was no reason to trust the magician, shaman or whatever he was. Several times she also glanced over to Heidenstein, who seemed to look on something in AR that she was unable to see.

She was curious whether the mage actually would be able to find something like Kah Pak had been at least able to validate that this one girl had been in that McHugh's. It certainly would make this entire mission easier. Though she was still not sure why those pirates would kidnap those girls. To sell them to someone else? Probably, but it seemed somewhat random. Maybe they wanted to make deals with the Lobatchevski and needed leverage.

Finally the shaman came back, the chameleon still sitting on his shoulder. He did not speak until he was only in three meters distance. "The girls are here. But out on the water. I think an island or something. But I cannot say for certain. Too far away, too much saltwater in-between."

Pakhet looked over at Heidenstein. "I don't suppose that you have a boat, do you, Doc?"

"No", he replied with a sigh. "But I am pretty sure I can get one."

At that Pakhet shrugged and watched him, while he once more produced his commlink out of his sleeve. He cut the direct communication with her for a moment and phoned somebody. He spoke with the voice dampened – even more so as he still had his helmet on and probably used the microphone inside to talk, as he had done to communicate with her.

"We will get a boat – and a driver", his voice finally announced through the in-ear monitor. "We will meet with him though." With a message a pointer appeared on a map of the area. It was on what once had been one of the piers.

"Alright", Pakhet said before speaking up to talk to Slove, who had taken the chameleon from his shoulder and was talking to it in Russian. Shamans... "Will you come along to help us find their location?"

The shaman looked up. "I will come. But I will not fight."

"Yeah, I have understood that much", Pakhet muttered, before speaking up again.

"Well, then let's go."

"No need to hurry", Heidenstein replied. "The boat won't be there within the next twenty minutes or so."

"And we don't know whether we will get into a gangfight on the way", Pakhet said and leapt onto her motorcycle.

"Good point." Heidenstein did the same, while the ork carefully allowed the chameleon to climb back underneath his jacket, before mounting up, too.

Pakhet could not suppress a smug grin, when there was a gang apparently controlling the drive to the pier, even though nobody could see this grin. Thanks to the cyber-eyes she was able to see details, even though they had halted to motorcycles in a safe distance to the control point of the gang, and was surprised to see that most of the gang members sitting there were not in their teens anymore. Most of them even seemed to be of Asian origin, which struck her as odd. After all Hamburg was not known for Yakuza or Triad activity – but then again she had just learned that the Cosa Nostra tried to gain hold again in the city.

"Should we try to bribe them?", she asked Heidenstein.

"I don't think, that would be a good idea", he answered. "Look at their arms."

She did. They all had red scarves bound around their left arm. Apparently their gang

leader really had not the slightest hint of imagination. "Well, they are not red bands", she said half jokingly.

"Too close to risk it", replied Heidenstein.

"Yes." Pakhet gave a shallow sigh. "But what about your boating service?"

"I'll send a message", he replied.

Soon enough another pointer appeared on the map – this time away from any of the piers and next to a piece of land that mostly had been sunk by the black flood.

When they arrived there a mid-sized boat was already standing there, waiting for them to climb aboard. Somebody seemed to have thought things through, as the boat appeared big enough to allow another ten persons to find shelter on deck.

Pakhet did not like the idea of leaving her motorcycle behind, but as they had to wade through the cold water for a bit and then climb aboard, there was no way to take it along.

So she parked it next to the motorcycles of Heidenstein and Slove in an alleyway between the ruins of what once had probably been warehouses. She made sure to activate even the last bit of security, even though she knew it would not stop determined gangers.

When they finally had boarded the boat the helmsman, who seemed to actually be of German, not Russian origin, as he spoke without the slightest accent and had introduced himself as "Martin", set the vehicle into motion.

They were mostly silent, while they were driving out onto the open waters of the former port. Slove seemed to be meditating and Pakhet could just hope, that he would be able to pinpoint where the girls were right now, because an island was not very precise in this area.

Pakhet leaned against the rail and looked out onto the water. Even with the low-light amplification of the cyber-eyes the water seemed to be black as ink and without many light sources around even the small islands with the occasional ruins on it where barely more as shadows in the dark. If they were to search on each on everyone on them, it was more likely for those self-proclaimed pirates to find them – or HAZMAT for that matter – then them finding those six girls.

Suddenly Slove stood up. "They are near", he said, before going over to Martin, the helmsman, to talk to him.

Pakhet exchanged gazes with Heidenstein, but did not say anything. Instead she started to check her weapons, as she was rather sure, there would be a shoot-out rather soon.

They drove towards a group of half sunken islands, on which there actually was light. It were two islands. On both there were ruins of warehouses standing, both largely overgrown with ivy. Somebody had constructed poles with floodlights at their ends, which illuminated a make-shift pier on the island towards which they were heading.

Thankfully Martin had enough wits to drive around the island and anchor behind some sickly looking brushes. There was no pier on this side of the tiny island, but also not much illumination, as the only light was a rather small lamp right over a small door on the backside of the warehouse.

"Can you make sure that those girls are in here?", Pakhet asked Slove, as she really did feel no urge to fight with whoever was inside just to realize they were on the wrong island.

"I can make sure, once I am ashore", the ork replied with plain voice.

Pakhet managed to suppress an impatient sight and jumped ashore glad that the dry parts of the island were in jumping distance for her. Heidenstein and Slove were less

lucky as she heard two splashed behind her, while Heidenstein was cursing quietly.

"This is enemy territory, right?", Slove asked.

"Probably", Pakhet said.

"Keep watch over my body", replied to ork.

"Sure."

While the shaman once more allowed his chameleon to climb up to his shoulder Pakhet looked around saw Heidenstein doing the same. This side of the island seemed to be completely abandoned and from all the shrubs growing here it seemed as if whoever was operating from here had not paid any concern about this shore. And while Pakhet did not quite like moving through these bushes, the ork seemed to be rather comfortable in this small wood.

"I don't like this", Pakhet muttered into her microphone.

"What exactly?", Heidenstein replied. "The creepy islands, that make-shift pier...?" There was still some humour in his voice, which Pakhet found in a way more unnerving than the things he spoke of.

"The fact, that they don't even try to hide and HAZMAT is ignoring it."

"Seems like they are well organized", Heidenstein said.

Pakhet shook her head and went over to the edge of the run-down warehouse to look over to their "pier". Unsure what to make of it she listened, as there were clearly voices from the other side of the house. The voices were all male and while she could not understand whatever language they spoke, she was pretty sure there were at least four or five people out there. "We will be outnumbered, if we pick a fight here."

"I know", replied the doc, now without the humour in his voice. "I hope we can handle it."

She turned around to him. "We?"

"I can help, too, you know?", he said. "At least a little."

Pakhet did her best not to snort. She had heard that many times before from other non-fighters right before they got shot. Of course, if Heidenstein was using his Parashield and had some knowledge about it, he probably was somehow capable of using it – but there was a big difference between "being able to use a gun" and "being of actual help in a fight." So she just replied: "Just don't get shot, okay?"

"Didn't plan on it", he replied. "And we don't know whether the girls are here at all."

Pakhet sighed and finally went back to where the shaman was sitting, still in meditation or whatever they called it. Nothing seemed to happen until the ork finally opened his eyes again. Hastily he looked around, took a deep breath and then stood up.

"They are here", he then said looking at them. "In this warehouse. There are guards in there, too. The girls are together. And they are afraid."

"No wonder", Pakhet muttered and looked back at Heidenstein, who now was just behind her.

He nodded. "Then we'll go in."

"Okay", Slove just said. "I'll be back on the boat." And without waiting for a reply he hurried back towards the boat, as if he could not wait to get away from this island.

For a moment Pakhet looked after him just hoping that his flight from the island had not to do with any spirit or anything magic – because she really did not like the prospect to stand in a fight against a spirit without an awoken on her side.

"I guess we'll take the back door", Heidenstein said making her turn around to him.

She just nodded and went for the back door, when she noticed a camera on the edge of the building. "Doc?", she whispered into the microphone. "I think we are watched."

He looked over to the cam. "If they are watching, they will have probably already seen us."

For a moment Pakhet considered that. She knew if she was to take out the camera she would probably trigger an alarm. And after all they could not even be sure whether somebody was watching any monitors. The security camera could be from whatever had been in there before or maybe was just a mockup. "I just hope we won't walk into a trap", she murmured and then went over to the door. She almost jumped when a twig cracked beneath her own feet.

Of course the door was locked. "What now?", she said. "When I jank it open, we will probably be noticed."

"Leave this to me", Heidenstein replied and knelt in front of the door. Then he produced a small case out of his sleeve and got two lock picks out of there and started to work on the old lock. Not before too long she heard a clicking sound the door moved a bit. Heidenstein tried to open the door carefully, but after a few inches it would not move.

"Let me do this", Pakhet said very quietly. She first looked inside, but from what she could see nobody was waiting for them inside. So she lifted up the door to make it easier to open and indeed she was able to open it wide enough for her and Heidenstein to glide inside. "Let me go first", she said and was glad when he did not argue about it.

Carefully she glided through the opening. Only half inside she looked around. There were container offices both to the left and the right side of the door and guards standing with to both sides, though further away from the door. It seemed neither had noticed her and so she hurried through the door and took cover at the side of the container on their left, where a small path was left leading towards a ladder that apparently belonged to the skeleton of what once had been a crane.

"Be careful", she whispered into the microphone. "There are guards."

"Okay", was the only reply she got, before Heidenstein, too, slipped through and sneaked over to her position.

"It would be great to know, where the girls are in here", she muttered.

Heidenstein looked around, before his gaze found the ladder. "I'll go up there", he said. "You cover my back?"

For a moment Pakhet did not reply, as she still was not willing to trust his physical skills, but then she nodded. "Okay."

While Heidenstein started to carefully climb up the old and rusty ladder, Pakhet moved back onto the edge of the container, from where she could look into the warehouse.

It seemed to be mostly empty and for all the care those "pirates" had taken to get their pier into shape, the inside looked almost as rundown as the outside of the building. There were apparent water leaks in the ceiling and on the walls and only about half of the old lamps on the ceiling seemed to be working properly, which maybe was why they had installed simple floodlights on top of the containers but facing into the hall.

The later half of the warehouse seemed to be an assorted store of crates that seemed rather untidy. There were two more containers there, which looked like they had been here before half of the island had sunken down, as rust was creeping up their walls.

Between those containers she could see another guard, who had sat down on a crate and apparently was talking to someone. His gun lay in his lap and he seemed to be rather relaxed, leading her to believe that they indeed did not expect them.

"Pakhet?", she heard Heidenstein's voice over the monitor.

"Yes?", she replied.

Another message appeared in her AR display and she opened, seeing a picture taken from up on the crane showing that part of the warehouse she could not see from her perspective. There were five more guards, three of which seemed to be talking at the far end of the hall. Heidenstein did send another picture which showed the entire hall and all the guards. Four of them – the two in front of the containers, the one she could see sitting on the crate and the one he seemed to be talking to – were marked red, the other three blue.

"You take out the red ones, I take the others", Heidenstein said over their connection.

"Okay", Pakhet answered, though she was unsure whether this would really work out.

"Wait until I have taken out the first two."

"Okay", confirmed Heidenstein.

Without further radio contact, she moved forward and waited at the edge of the office container she was hiding behind. She took out the Parashield and checked the darts, before waiting for a good moment. She wanted to take out the guy in front of the opposite container out first, as he would be able to see her more easily, should he get suspicious.

Right now that guy – like all the other gangers – seemed to be rather bored, though he at least tried to pay attention.

She aimed and shot. The next moment the ganger lifted his hand to feel his next, as he apparently had felt something. But she did not wait for him to notice the dart and rather aimed for the other guard, who seemed to have noticed nothing. Once more she shot and heard the guy mumble something in another language she by now suspected to be Mandarin, just before both guards hit the floor almost in the same moment.

Outside a motor suddenly howled, but the noise soon faded. Probably a boat driving away and Pakhet could just pray that it was not their boat.

She moved forward, ducked to the ground, as she was rather sure that somebody was inside the two office containers and both had windows in them. She pressed herself close to the metal of the containers, hoping that the talking guy, who would have her in plain view by now would be blinded by the light.

There were about twelve meters between the end of the office containers and where that guy was sitting – twelve meters with a couple of larger crates in between, that would make it harder to see her approaching but right now also hindered her from shooting. There were only three more darts, before she had to reload so she did not want to waste them.

Hence she approached him in the cover of the crates, ready to take out both guards in direct combat, but just when she made half the way, the guy who so far had been out of her view and was talking to the one sitting on the crate, casually looked around and spotted her. She could see the surprise in his face, as he too shocked for a moment to react.

She sprinted forward, just as he shouted a warning and readied his machine-gun. He wanted to shoot just in the moment she reached him and yanked the gun upwards, so a short salve perforated the old roof.

Pakhet wrenched the gun from out of his hands and knocked him out with a punch to his forehead. With fluid motion she turned around to the other guard, who nervously tried to unjam the safety of his gun – but he was too slow and got sent to the floor within a blink.

There was no further shooting, so she had to assume that Heidenstein either had not done his move or actually knocked all of those other four guys out. She looked around, but could not see any of the other guards standing, though she had no time to go looking for downed gangers. "Well, interesting", she muttered to herself, though knowingly that he would probably hear her.

The next moment she ran for one of the rusting containers to take cover behind it. After all there had been more guys outside and she did not know how many of those. "Careful", she said quietly. "There might be more."

"What was that about?", Heidenstein asked back.

"Saving ammunition and getting a proper field of fire", she replied grudgingly. Looking around she right now could not see any more gangers, but looking towards the big warehouse gates opposite to the container they were open for about a meter. Sadly though the opening was right behind another stack of crates though she could not properly shoot if somebody was to get through it.

She could hear shouting from outside, though. While waiting to be able to shoot, she refilled the Parashield with two more darts.

"There are three more", she heard Heidenstein's voice over their connection.

Once more she walked to the other side of the container, staying hidden behind it, and tried to make out one of the gangers coming inside. Then the first of them came into view. "You take the last one, I take the first guy."

"Okay."

She took aim and shot, while the ganger looked around. He jumped, when the dart hit him, and started shooting in her general direction without hitting her. Then he fainted, while she could also here another body hit the floor.

The last guard moved forward, looking around frantically. "Who is there?", he shouted in German.

Pakhet aimed at him, but just when she shot he moved forward and she missed him. While she could not be sure, whether he had noticed the dart or was just panicking, he now ran for one of the two office containers.

She cursed silently, when the ganger reached the door and found cover inside.

"So, what now?", she asked.

"Now we hope the girls are still alive and where not on the boat", Heidenstein replied.

"I will take a look at those containers."

Pakhet hesitated, as she would have rather taken care of it herself. But than she agreed: "I'll cover your back."

"Thanks", he replied.

When she looked up at the crane, she could see him move back towards the ladder, where he climbed down. Crouched she moved for the ladder, too, trying to stay out of view from the windows of the two offices.

"I'll take that guy out", Heidenstein said.

"If there is only one guy", Pakhet replied.

While she faced the hall and stood against the edge of the container, she raised her gun again, ready to shoot at anything that would move.

Meanwhile Heidenstein moved closer to the window of the first container – the same container the one ganger had run inside. Carefully he tried looking inside, when a shot sounded and the glass of the container window broke with a crash, but Heidenstein ducked in time to evade the shot. Somebody inside the container yelled something, though Pakhet could not understand what he was saying.

Then Heidenstein hesitated for a moment. He put the Parashield back into the

holster, but in the next moment another weapon seemed to just appear in his hand. There were a few seconds of silence, though by now Pakhet, too, could hear some muffled screams. She was tempted to do something herself, but decided against it. She wanted to see what was to happen next.

The person inside yelled again, but then Heidenstein stood up and in one fluid motion raised his arms and shot with what Pakhet now realized to be a Defiance Ex-Shocker. Somebody inside – a man – screamed and then there was silence.

Pakhet looked at Heidenstein, who took a deep breath.

“The girls are here”, he said.

Pakhet nodded and looked over at the second office. “Take care of them. I’ll make sure we don’t have no more company.”

“Okay”, he just said and went inside the first container.

Meanwhile Pakhet carefully moved towards the other office, before kicking in the door. She looked around the gun drawn, but there was nobody here. The office was mostly empty, though it seemed to have been recently used.

She exhaled with relief, before moving out of the container to investigate the rest of the warehouse – just to make sure no other ganger was still standing, but she did not find anyone. All of the gangers lay unconsciously on the floor, all but the two she had taken out in close combat, having a small injection-dart in their neck.

Looking over to the offices, she had to smirk. So the good doctor was able to shoot. Well, that probably was worth something. Yes, it was interesting, interesting indeed.

XI – The six seconds deal

Somehow Pakhet was actually surprised when later that evening she received a transfer of eleven thousand Nuyen. The only message attached to the anonymous transfer simply read: "Thanks." Of course she accepted the transfer, but for once she did so with a smile. This at least solved her money problem for the month.

She had to admit, that she somehow had not expected Heidenstein to actually give her an equal share, when she had cautiously left him to bring the girl back by himself. She had preferred this to getting to close to the Lobatchewskis, as she had heard more than enough rumors to know that she would not like to end up as their "go to" runner for cases like this. Because the next time the girls to bring back might have actually run away.

At least she was relieved that this had not been the case this time. The girls had seemed to be rather glad to have been saved, though this did not change anything about her thoughts of the Mafia and their operations.

She decided to take the next day or two off, because now she could finally do so again without feeling worried about the money. That of course would not mean, she would entirely slack, but she needed to have some proper free time.

She wrote a message to Heidenstein, which did not contain much content either. "Thanks. Will take a few days off." She wanted to make sure he would not come to Michael's shop the next day without her being there.

And thus she was finally, for the first time since she had stumbled into this bunch of idiots just because of her curiosity, able to just relax for two days. She trained, hung around on her sofa and for once went into the trideo dome together with Robert, just so for once he could complain about the way modern trid-pics were shot.

After those two days she felt way better than she had in a few weeks, though she knew herself well enough to know that she would get bored of this soon enough if it things were always to be like this.

So on the third day after the run, she called Michael again.

As always Michael picked up rather quickly. "Pakhet, what's up?", he said in a way that was clearly meant to annoy her. "Bored already again?"

"You have a job?", she just replied.

"Nope", he said. "Well, nothing for you to do at least, if you have not learned hacking in the meantime."

"Sad to tell you, that, no, I have still no computer skills more than searching stuff in the damn trix", she answered.

"Too bad", Michael replied and she knew even without videofeed that he did so with a grin.

"I might come over later to work on some weapons", she then added quickly.

"Alr-", but before Michael could finish, she had already hung up. After all the friendliness between them was nothing but a farce and both of them knew it.

She hesitated the commlink still in hand, but then with a sigh decided to call Heidenstein. Still she was not entirely sure whether she should keep the contact up. The only way she could justify it was with the thought that he was a doctor on one hand and on the other hand knew some useful stuff. Yet it contradicted her personal rules to hang out with him again even if it was just to tinker with some guns.

"Whatever", she muttered to herself and brushed that thought aside. Even though

she considered his precocious explanation-style somewhat annoying she had to admit that it was somewhat effective. And working on the gun together with him was at least more entertaining then working alone.

So she dialled his number and waited for him to pick up.

It took him about three rings to reply: "Yes, Heidenstein here?"

"Hey, doc", Pakhet replied. "It's Pakhet."

"I know", he replied with some amusement.

"Yeah, why does one bother with introduction, when you can see the number?"

He chuckled. "Indeed."

"I wanted to ask you, whether you have some time for some weapon-building later on", she said.

There was a short moment of silence on his end of the line, he replied: "Sure, why not. Though I have some work to do before."

"No hurry", Pakhet answered.

"Alright", Heidenstein said. "I'll be there at 5pm."

"Okay. See you then." She hung up and looked at the time display of her commlink. It was only 11am meaning that she had more then enough time to drive to the shooting range.

Like all the other days Pakhet made sure to arrive at Michael's twenty minutes earlier, so she could make sure Heidenstein would not be alone with Michael. And then again there was the simple fact that it allowed her to have an eye on her fixer – and be it just for twenty minutes.

"You know", he said, when she entered the shop, without looking up from his commlink, "it would not hurt you to be a bit more friendly."

"It would not hurt me", she commented, "but it would be a waste of energy."

"Would it now?" An eyebrow raised he finally looked up to her.

She shrugged and leaned against the counter. "Well, why would I bother with superficial niceness towards you at least?"

"True." Michael grinned, before turning around and walking into his back room. A minute later he returned with two cups of soykaf.

"Should I suspect it to be poisoned?", Pakhet asked but took one of the cups.

"Why would I poison you?", Michael replied taking a sip. "It is not lucrative."

She took a sip herself, though soykaf could simply not compare to real coffee. "Oh, how lucky I am."

"Is the good doctor coming again?", Michael asked after a few seconds of silence.

"Yes", she replied knowing very well, that he would start all over again.

But Michael did not taunt her, but instead raised once more an eyebrow. "How interesting."

Pakhet did not say anything to this, as she really had no mind for playing his kind of word games. After all she did not need Michael to remind her, that indeed this was not entirely like herself, but it was none of his concern.

Once she had finished up the soykaf she let Michael give her the keys for the basement and once again waited for Heidenstein to arrive, while tinkering with one gun Michael apparently had just gotten in. It was a smaller rifle and from what she could see it was either hit with some electric weapon or had been messed with by a decker. All the electrics from the smart gun system were fried, so she had to replace all of it.

Sure enough she was working for only a few minutes, when Heidenstein came down

the stairs.

"I get the feeling I am late again", he said with a grin, when he sat down besides her.

"No, no." She did not look up, as she just tried to loosen a wire that had melded into the gun itself. "I was just early."

He did not reply to that. Instead he was silent and she could not shake the feeling that he was watching her. "Well, you barely need a teacher anymore."

Still without looking at him she shrugged. Finally the wire became loose and she was able to remove the electronic system from it. "I tend to think, that I pick up new things rather fast."

"I wonder, why I am sitting here", he replied though he did not seem annoyed.

She looked at him and shrugged. "You could maybe start by explaining how you can get a new smart gun system into a gun like this."

So he did once again switching into the annoying teaching-mode. Pakhet growled and rolled her eyes, but otherwise did not complain.

As rewiring the entire gun was complicated it took them about two hours to just fix this one gun. The work was tiring and Pakhet was rather glad in the end, that she made sure her gun never had any "smart" systems included. She had concluded that this gun probably once had belonged to either some guy at HanSec or some poor guard at one of the bigger company and sold to Michael after a successful run during which the former owner probably died.

"Why do I have the feeling, we are working for Michael for free?", Heidenstein said with a sigh, when they were finished.

"Because we are", Pakhet replied sighing herself. "Well, he sees it as compensation for using his workshop."

"Sure." The doc shrugged.

It was then that somebody knocked on the door and knowing Michael it was probably him. "Yes?", Pakhet said and stood up to open the door.

She was right: It was Michael. "Do you have a moment?", he asked with low voice.

Pakhet turned around to Heidenstein, shrugged and replied: "Sure." She followed Michael onto the staircase closing the door behind herself at Michael seemed to want a private conversation.

When Michael turned around to her on the staircase he grinned. "Well, you were looking for a job, right?"

Considering that she right now had enough money for two month it was not as much of a pressing issue, as it had been a few days ago, Pakhet just shrugged. "Sure. Why? Do you have something?"

"Exactly", Michael replied. "Something urgent. And dangerous. But well paid."

Somewhat Pakhet did not like the sound of that. "High risk, high reward?"

"Yep, exactly", Michael said.

"How much?"

"Twenty thousand."

It sounded exactly like the kind of run Pakhet had done her best to stay far away from so far.. "For what?"

"Extraction. Somebody important got under fire and is waiting to be rescued."

"And?" Pakhet raised an eyebrow.

"Nothing. That's all the information I have. They said something about a gang. But that's all."

She gave a sigh. "Great." After all she did not like the sound of this. The problem with this kind of run was, that they tended to rise reputation more. Well, that was one of

the problem, because she still tried to keep her head low and her life long. The other problem was that the higher the risk, the higher the chance of a Johnson pulling some kind of stunt. Then again it was a lot of money and considering that it was hard to get jobs as long as HanSec did not lower their alert, she could not be sure to get proper jobs during the next month. Somehow she knew she would regret this: "Okay. I'll do it."

"Great. I'll log that and sent you the data. It is not far from here." Michael gave a smug grin. He probably had just made money by getting somebody for the job.

Pakhet just gave another sigh and went down into the basement. "Doc?"

He looked at her. "Hmm?"

"I'll have to go. A run. Something urgent." She hesitated for a moment. In general she was rather proud of her skills as a fighter, but she was not so prig she would think to be able to pick a fight against an entire gang. "Would you like to tag along? Equal share in the payment."

"What kind of run?", Heidenstein asked, as she had done herself.

"Extraction", she explained. "Apparently a gang had started a shoot-out or something. Yes, I would like to have more information, too."

Heidenstein seemed to consider this for a short while. "Alright. I'll come. Let's just hope that's enough."

"Oh, believe me, I hope that, too."

The area to which Michael had given them the coordinates was in the upper north of Harburg, just south of what was generally called "Wildost". While they were only given the family name of the guy they were looking for – as well as a picture – she was rather sure that he was at least some kind of manager of a local company. Otherwise nobody would have been willing to post a twenty thousand reward for quick extraction.

Pakhet had to ask herself, what this guy was doing near to Wildost. Normal people – meaning, everybody but what was generally considered street scum – tended to stay as far away from there as possible. Not only that the area was notorious for gang activity, but it was also well known for having a certain attraction on everything toxic. This thought made Pakhet promise herself, that no amount of money in the world would make her get that guy out, if it meant to fight a toxic spirit without having magical support herself.

When she drove down the street parallel to where the attack seemed to have happened she could not hear gunfire, which made her unsure as it could mean two things: Either they were too late and whatever had happened was already over or somebody was actually waiting for them. She did not like either idea.

"I think it is better, when we walk a bit", she said to Heidenstein, before driving into a parking lot one block away from the coordinates. "I really don't want any holes in this car."

"I really don't want to any holes in my chest", Heidenstein commented on this.

"Then let's better try to not draw any attention", Pakhet replied and got out of the car.

Once more she put on her helmet, as she certainly was not keen on having a hole on her head. Thankfully she almost always took her armoured jacket with her, even if it was just to "visit" Michael – it was once of the things that could be called both paranoid and reasonable – and thanks to Michael she even had a heavy pistol and a rifle with her.

Once she had locked the car she listened carefully for any sounds of fighting like shooting, yelling or something similar but it was utterly silent. She pointed at an alleyway that apparently lead behind the row of houses in front of which she had parked.

A message popped up in her field of vision – another request to open a communication channel between them. Again she accepted.

“Let's go through the backyards”, she said. “I want to get an idea of what we are dealing with.”

“Take the lead”, Heidenstein replied and drew a gun – not the Parashield, as she noticed. Without any comment she just did as he had said and lead the way into the dark alleyway.

She was thankful for her lowlight vision as she could see enough to not trample into a full garbage bag blocking the way. Well, this was just what she had expected from an alleyway so near to Wildost, as it was rather messy and run down. But at least it also probably meant that the response time of HanSec to anything was rather long.

They reached the backyard of the building which was more the backyard of several houses having their parking lot in the back – though it was mostly empty. She looked around: Nobody seemed to be here. Well, hopefully nobody was here, she thought to herself, knowing very well that mages were able to hide in plain sight.

But then she saw what she had hoped for: One of the buildings that would face the street next to their coordinates had a fire escape in the back and the ladder was even down. She guesses that some squatter might have used it to get into an empty apartment. Whatever reason – it was lucky for them, as it meant they were able to get up there.

“Doc”, she said and pointed at the ladder. “I'll go up.”

He nodded, wearing his helm again like her. “Shall I stay down here?”

Pakhet considered this for a second. “It might be better. Cover my back, alright?”

“Alright”, he replied.

Once more she looked around just to make sure nobody else was here. Then she ran over for the ladder and climbed upwards.

The old building was five storeys high and had a pitched roof. While she had no problem to speak of, to climb the stairs after the ladder the roof was more of a problem – especially considering that she tried to stay unseen. But finally she reached the top and was able to look over the street.

She instantly saw, what probably had been their target's ride, as there was a burning limo to the side of the street with a body lying nearby – hopefully not their target himself. But there was no trace of any attacker. Strange, she thought and tried to see whether somebody was hiding in the shadows between the nearby buildings.

But then she jumped as she heard the clattering sound of a helicopter coming close. Startled she looked around to see a helicopter coming towards her from the west. There was a searchlight at the bottom of the helicopter, meaning that it was probably HanSec or HAZMAT looking at what had happened without moving too close.

Well, she did not want to be seen by them crawling on the roof of a house within good shooting range of the burning vehicle. Quickly she let herself glide down the roof and ran down the fire escape to hide in the shadows.

The searchlight was not directed at her so they probably had not seen her.

“HanSec?”, Heidenstein's voice asked over the communication channel.

“Seems that way”, she replied, before jumping down the last storey and going over to him. “Probably had a call but were too afraid to drive out here. They'll probably turn

around in a few minutes."

"Let's hope so", he said. "What have you seen?"

"A limousine", she answered. "Burning. Probably our dear Mr." – she looked at the data – "Mr. Gronbach's vehicle. At least one body. Let's hope it is not Gronbach himself." She started to walk towards the alleyway through which they had come. "Let's look for him."

Heidenstein looked up at the sky where right now the helicopter was turning around and flying back to where he had come from. "I have another idea", he said. "I think we both know, this could be a trap. So I say I go up there and cover you from there."

Pakhet considered this for a moment. He was right. This could be a trap. But she also knew that a pistol was not good for fire cover. "Okay", she finally agreed and got the rifle from her back. "But do me a favour and use this one." For a moment she hesitated. So far she knew that he was able to fire a pistol but that did not mean he was able to fire anything else. "You do know how to use this, right?"

"Yes, I do", he said with firm voice.

She looked at him – though she of course did not see much more than her own reflection in the helmets visor. "Okay. Then I'll go now."

"Okay."

With steady steps but without running Pakhet walked towards the alleyway and back to the street where she had parked the Jackrabbit. Just when she was at the alleyway she once again heard Heidenstein's voice through the communication line: "I'm in position."

"Rodger that", she replied.

Now she had reached the street and slowed down, as she felt like a sitting duck in the light of the street lamps. As close to the buildings as possible she moved down the street, until she reached the road on which she had seen the limousine.

Carefully she looked around. When she could still not see any adversary she walked over to the burning car. She turned the body that was lying on its stomach around and was relieved to find it not to be Gronbach. The muscular body was a human – probably a bodyguard – and he was dead. Several rounds of probably automated fire had honeycombed his body, but his gun was still in his hand.

Pakhet stood up and walked over to the limousine and tried to look inside. There were many holes in the fender of the vehicle and all the windows were shattered. Somebody had fired at it with armour piercing rounds. Automated, probably. But something was odd about it: It looked like most of the bullets had been fired from straight above.

At least she only found one other body in the car and this body sat behind the wheel. While it was impossible to identify the burned body, it was unlikely that Gronbach had driven himself.

"Any trace of our target?", Heidenstein's voice sounded through the in-ear monitor.

"No", Pakhet replied still walking around the car to look for more clues. "No trace of him. The dead guy over there seems to be a bodyguard. There is a body in the car, but I don't think that is him, either."

"So he was kidnapped or has escaped", Heidenstein concluded.

"I would say so", she said and took a closer look at the bullet holes in the car. No matter how she looked at them it seemed clear that the shooting position had been up high. She looked at the nearby buildings, but if she tried to reconstruct the line of fire it did not seem likely that several gunmen had sat on the roofs – and from the patterns of the holes it seemed rather obvious that there had been several shooters.

Then she saw something. It was just a short reflection in the air but it was enough to get her to focus on it. A rotor-drone was flying high above the street. It was too far away to see details – even with her vision magnification – but it was a rotor-drone no doubt. HanSec never used rotor-drones.

“Doc? Caution”, she warned Heidenstein. “We have at least one drone above us.”

There was a short silence on the communication channel, before he replied: “Make that at least two.”

“Drek”, she muttered. She was unable to see whether the drones carried weapons but she would have made any bet they did. “I’ll look for Gronbach. Keep an eye on the sky.”

“Rodger that”, Heidenstein agreed his tone more serious then before.

Pakhet looked around. Where could Gronbach have gone? Well, the correct answer was: “Pretty much anywhere.” The attack had happened about half an hour ago, so he could have made at least a mile.

But then again: If she read the signs right this had been no try to kidnap the man but an actual assassination-attempt. Then the assassin was probably a rigger using the drones to do his work from as far away as possible. This would mean, that those drones were still surveying the area because the attempt had failed, but their target had not escaped but found cover.

With fire from above Gronbach could not have come far which meant he was still nearby.

The only way to get out of the line of fire within a small radius of the burning vehicles was to flee into one of the buildings. There was no shop within three hundred meters making this less likely. But most of the buildings seemed to be empty and there was a chance that he had found an open door.

Quickly she moved to the next front door and tried to open it. It was locked. So tried the same with the houses next to the vehicle but the result was the same. Some of the doors were even nailed shut.

She looked around again for clues where Gronbach might have gone. Finally her gaze stopped at the dead bodyguard. He was lying on the street as if he had tried to crossed it. If he did his job well he had followed his protégé.

She crossed the street, keeping an eye on the drones above. She was rather sure that whoever was controlling them had long noticed her arrival, but seemed to not want to fire at her. Maybe he or she was hoping they would bring Gronbach out of his hiding place.

Again she tried to front doors of the homes on this side of the street and this time she found a door that was neither nailed shut nor locked.

“Heidenstein?”, she said into the microphone. “Can you come over? I might need your help.”

A sigh. “Okay. Do you think he is in there?”

“He might be”, she replied. “At least that’s my best bet. He might need medical attention and I would rather have someone to cover my back, before I go in there.”

“Understood”, he said. “Just a moment.”

Pakhet made a step inside the building so she had at least some cover from the drones above. She tried to make no noise just in case another bodyguard had survived and was ready to shoot at anything coming near to Gronbach.

Heidenstein’s “moment” of course actually stretched over several minutes, though Pakhet had expected nothing else. Still she was growing more and more nervous waiting for him as she just hoped the assumed assassin was more patient then she

was.

When the doc finally arrived she took a further step into the building and ducked down, before looking around to make sure nobody was laying an ambush. But there was nobody there. She was standing in an old and rather ruinous stair case. The walls were damp and the two only doors on the ground floor were nailed shut.

Once more she looked around, but there was really nothing. The plaster on the walls was cracking and in rather bad shape, while the surfacing of the concrete stairs had long been removed – stolen, Pakhet suspected. At least the stairs themselves seemed to be stable.

“Let's go upstairs”, she said before taking the lead. She tried to be as quiet as possible to not gain unwanted attention. She was still unsure whether all of Gronbach's bodyguards were dead and after the attack a jumpy guard would probably fire at anyone coming near, but when they reached the second floor nobody was firing at them.

The staircase was at the side of the building so that it lead into a small hall with four doors that probably lead into the former apartments. There were also two windows at the staircase itself, one looking at the backyard. Both windows were broken, but at least nobody had boarded up the opening.

After a moment of hesitation Pakhet looked through the back window to search the sky for more drones and whoever was after Gronbach did not fail her: There was another rotor-drone up in the night sky.

“Great”, she muttered and could feel Heidenstein stepping behind her.

“What is it?”

“Another drone”, she said. “And I cannot say whether it is one of those we have seen before.”

“We need to take care of those things sooner or later”, Heidenstein replied.

“I know that.” She almost gave a sigh. “We need to find Gronbach first.” Turning away from the window she took a closer look at the doors to the hallway.

Two of them were nailed shut, but the others were ajar – maybe Gronbach had sought shelter in one of the apartments.

“Let's take a look in side”, she said very quietly and slowly went over to the last door on the left. In front of it she waited for Heidenstein to catch up to her, before opening the door gun in hand.

She was somewhat right: Somebody shot at them. But the guy huddling in the corner of the room was so bad at it, that the bullets only hit the ceiling making bits plaster raining down on them.

One look at the man was enough for her to confirm, that they had found their mission target: Gronbach. The man was roughly at the end of his fourties, his hair was already pretty thin and even in his designer suite he was not much to look at. Sure, he was somewhat athletic but Pakhet would have bet any money that this was thanks to the marvels of modern medicine rather than due to workouts. In short: He looked rather pathetic at the moment.

“It's alright”, she said. “You are Mr. Gronbach, right?” She stood still at the door knowing he would be likely to shoot if she took another step towards them. Then she remembered her own gun and lowered it.

The man did not reply instantly but finally lowered the weapon a few inches. “Y-yes”, he admitted though something in his voice told her, that it was not his real name. Well, she had not assumed it was.

“We were hired to get you to safety”, she explained with a slow, calm voice.

He was hesitant now lowering the weapon further. "Who are you then?"

"Shadowrunners", Pakhet replied. She had no intent to tell him any kind of name. "Are you hurt?"

The man did not reply and he did not need to. His suite was torn open and Pakhet could see blood glittering in the dim light that shone through one of the windows.

"Take off your helmets!", he demanded.

"I am afraid we cannot do that", Pakhet said. "But if you were to lower your gun, my partner could have a look at your injuries. He is a doctor."

"Partner, huh?", she heard a quite, but clearly amused voice in her ear.

She did not reply but rather waited for Gronbach to react. Finally he drew a long breath but then dropped the gun.

Pakhet stepped aside so that Heidenstein was able to get to the man. She considered lighting a flash-light for Heidenstein, but then threw the thought aside. If they were to use a light one of the drones might fire through the window and she really did not want to risk it. Considering the speed at which the doctor got to work, his cyber-eyes probably were equipped with low light vision like hers.

She walked over to the window. Somehow the glass in this one was still intact, though rather dirty, but after a moment she was able to see the drone in the sky above.

Still she had not figured out, how they were to get Gronbach out of here. She looked at the map of the area where Michael had marked the drop-off point where they were supposed to bring the man. It was an underground garage about a mile from here. Even if she was to bring him to her car – she knew he would be dead before they reached it. Of course she could order the auto-pilot of the Jackrabbit to drive the car in front of the house but it would make no big difference: She had seen what the ammunition from those drones had done to the limousine and she was rather sure that thing had had better armour than her small car had.

"Drek", she muttered very, very silently to make sure Gronbach would not hear it.

She looked up at the sky. The drones also did not hover in place but seemed to circle the area to make sure Gronbach would not escape through the back door. The back door – maybe it was still worth taking a look at the backyard. One of the closed doors downstairs probably lead there.

"Doc? I'll take a short look around downstairs, okay?", she whispered.

"Okay", Heidenstein confirmed.

She went for the door before turning around to Gronbach. "I will look for an escape route. Please stay here."

The man, who was still pale, just stared at her. "O-okay", he finally stuttered.

Without any further words Pakhet went downstairs to break open the back door, that was nailed shut. Thankfully the cyber-arms gave her enough strength to force the door open without a problem, opening the way to the backyard, as she had suspected. The backyard was as rundown as the backyards they had crossed earlier: There were a few old garbage bags lying around and grass was growing from underneath the paving. This backyard once had served as a parking lot, too, but she did not even have to try to know that neither of the three rusty cars standing around here would not move. There were a few garages here that might provide cover, but they still would have to reach the Jackrabbit and get away.

No, this was no proper escape route. Damn it.

Pakhet returned to the second floor but not to the apartment in which Heidenstein was probably still stitching up Gronbach. Instead she kept standing at the window of the staircase to keep an eye on the drones. Maybe she could find out how many of

those damn things were in the air – or at least how many were cycling over-head. Of course it was hard to tell, as the drones basically looked the same and were cycling at least two hundred meters above, making it hard to see details, but by the speed they moved it seemed that there were three drones on patrol. Of course that did not say, whether there were any stationary drones nearby.

"Heidenstein?", she asked into the microphone.

A few seconds of silence, then: "Yes?"

"Are you done with Gronbach? I need to talk to you for a moment." Even though she was not sure what she expected him to say, she did not want to make any decision by herself after taking him along.

"Okay", he replied, before she could hear him talk to Gronbach. "Please wait here for a moment. I'll have a short talk with my partner about our strategy."

Probably Gronbach replied something, though Pakhet could not hear it over the communication line. Maybe he asked where Heidenstein was going.

"We'll stay on the floor. We will just talk for a moment", the doc then reassured. Then Heidenstein came through the apartment door and walked towards her. "What is it?"

"I'm looking for some creative ideas to get Gronbach out of here", Pakhet said. "There are three drones cycling above, but maybe there are other stationary drones. They cycle above this building so no chance they will not see us if we bring him out. Looking at the limousine out there, I don't think the Jackrabbit as it is will protect us from those bullets, so even if we were to reach the car it would be barely any help."

Heidenstein considered this for a moment. "Well, there would be a way to get him to safety. He has a Crash Cart bracelet. Though that would mean we would not get paid."

"Why hasn't he just used the bracelet then?", Pakhet replied. "Isn't that why people buy this kind of stuff?"

At this Heidenstein just shrugged. "I wondered that, too."

Pakhet looked at the window going through their options. If there was a reason for Gronbach to not have used the bracelet so far, it would make for bad rep to force him to. Also she was not keen on giving up on the twenty thousand yet. "Well, we could shoot the drones out of the sky I guess. Well, we could try at least." Normally flying drones were not well armoured, but it was hard to tell whether these were modified or not.

"We could use that as a distraction", Heidenstein muttered. "I would think that the drones would try to defend themselves when somebody shoots at them. So if I was to shoot at one of the drones, the others might attack me and you could take Gronbach out of here."

It took Pakhet a moment to realize that he was serious about this. "Wait a moment", she objected. "You shoot the drones, while I take Gronbach? Last time I checked I was the sharp shoot."

"I am not questioning that", Heidenstein replied. "But we don't know for certain that whoever is after that guy only uses drones for it. For all we know somebody is waiting out there as a fail save. Maybe the rigger has called for reinforcements by now. And I am of no use in close combat, but I do know how to use a rifle. Hence it would be better if you protected Gronbach while I try to shoot down the drones. After all I don't even need to hit them. I just need to distract them, right?"

Right now it bothered Pakhet that she could not see his face. All of this bothered her. There was no arguing with the logic of his reasoning, but she did not like it. He had to know as well as she did that the drones – once distracted – would shoot back. Drek.

"Okay", she slowly said. "But don't take any unnecessary risks."

"Believe me: I will do my best", he replied with a grim tone in his voice.

"Good", Pakhet muttered and once more looked out. "But be warned: The rifle does not carry armour-piercing rounds", she then said.

"I did not expect it to."

"Then I'll go and get Gronbach", Pakhet finally said and went over to the apartment door. Before opening it, she took out her commlink to send an order to her car. The guy – whoever he was – did not need to know her number plate. Then she opened the door. "Gronbach?", she now said with loud voice. "We need to go now."

The man was still sitting in the corner of the room. "What are you planning to do?"

"My partner will make sure to distract the drones, while I will bring you to a car", she calmly explained their plan. "It won't be far."

"What if your distraction won't work?", the man asked warily.

He started to annoy her. "Then it will at least get rid of some of the drones." For a moment she looked at him. "Listen, we don't have that many options. Whoever is after you might soon give up on the drones and sent in a runner team to kill you in person. He might have already had. If he did we won't have much time to get you out of here."

Gronbach seemed to consider this for a few seconds. Then he finally got up. "Okay."

"Good. Then come. And – you probably know this – do what I say", she said firmly.

"Okay", the man grumpily agreed and looked at her with some anger in his eyes.

For just a brief moment Pakhet considered knocking him out. That way he would be less of a problem. But she was not keen on carrying him around and while it was certainly a way to deal with those situations most Johnson did not took nicely to it.

At least he followed her, when she went over to Heidenstein, who had readied the rifle and taken position next to the window.

"Ready?", she asked against quietly enough so Gronbach would not hear it.

"Ready", Heidenstein confirmed. "You should take the med-kit, though." He nodded at the backpack he had been carrying the whole time.

"No need", she replied. "I've got one myself."

"Not one like this", he answered.

"Best quality money can buy. Believe me, I don't need it", Pakhet replied not without some annoyance.

Heidenstein hesitated. "Okay." For a moment he paused. "You don't happen to use a biomonitor as well?"

Pakhet had to grab a hold of herself to not give a witty come back. The question was warranted as only a few runners she had come to know were using automated medkits, which were equipped with biomonitors. There was an annoying tendency with runners to think themselves invincible, which was why most of them died. "I actually do."

Instead of an reply Heidenstein sent a request to view her biomonitor.

She hesitated to comply as it would mean to add her biomonitor to her PAN – making it hackable. Then again she would not need to add the medkit itself, making it relatively save. She hesitated before sending a request herself and allowing the biomonitor to access her PAN.

Moments later a diagram from a biomonitor appeared in her field of view forcing her to minimize it before being able to see properly.

She turned around to Gronbach. "Let's go."

The man looked at her with some confusion as he had probably not heard anything of their conversation, but he did as he was told and followed her.

At the front door she waited and signalled Gronbach to do the same. "We are in position, doc", she said.

"Rodger", he replied and she could hear him taking a deep breath. Then there were a few seconds of silence before a shot sounded.

Gronbach jumped but stayed put as he was supposed to.

"I took the first one down", Heidenstein said.

Pakhet had one hand at the door, ready to pull it open and run outside but first she needed confirmation that their plan was working. This confirmation came in form of the sound made by automated gun-fire coming from above.

"Okay", she shouted at Gronbach. "Go! Run!" She pulled open the door and ran outside herself, looking up to make sure there were no more drones on this side of the building – and thankfully there were none or at least she was unable to see any.

At least Gronbach was able to run properly and they reached the other side of the street within a few seconds.

Another single shot sounded followed by several bursts of automated fire.

"Right!", she yelled at her charge when he hesitated where to turn. "Left at the next turn." Falling back herself she ran behind him to be able to keep him in view.

She heard Heidenstein cursing under his breath while his biomonitor flashed. His vitals were spiking.

"You okay, doc?", she asked while running.

No answer, but another single shot. So he was still able to shoot, good, though his vitals made her worried.

"Left!", she screamed when Gronbach nearly ran straight ahead instead of taking the turn. Thankfully he reacted and turned left, while she was close behind him.

When she turned the corner she could see her car and accelerated to open the door.

"Inside!", she ordered Gronbach and thankfully he once again did what he was told.

Another shot behind them, then silence. No more shots, no automated fire.

"Doc?", she asked into her microphone.

A moment of silence. Then: "I am okay. More or less." He groaned. "There were four drones, not three." Another groan, but at least according to his vitals he was not close to death.

"Can you come?", Pakhet asked after a moment of hesitation as she knew it was not wise to wait for him. What she had said to Gronbach might be true: There were probably reinforcements on their way. Maybe the rigger had even started some more drones. She should bring Gronbach away while she had the time. But still she hesitated to leave Heidenstein, who was clearly hurt, behind.

"Yes. Just... Wait a moment", Heidenstein said.

"Okay", she said, before opening the door at the driver's side of the car.

Gronbach looked at her, when she made no move to sit down and start the car. "What are we waiting for?"

"My partner", she replied. "He will be here in a minute."

"We don't have the time", the man protested. "Didn't you say reinforcements might be on their way?"

"We have a minute", Pakhet said and kept standing outside – just so she could better react in case that they were attacked.

Gronbach did mutter something to himself, but he seemed to be intelligent enough that he realized he needed them to get out of here.

Still looking around to see whether more drones would come their way Pakhet was relieved when she recognized Heidenstein at the corner. He was walking fast, though

not running and from the way he held himself she was rather sure he was still in pain. She got into the car and gave the command for the back door to open.

Seemingly relieved himself Heidenstein sat on the back seat and closed the door. "I wanted to ask anyway", he said, "since when do Jackrabbits come with a back seat." Pakhet grinned to herself when she started the motor. "Well, normally they don't." Though this also meant she would later be easier to find for Gronbach or whoever he was working for as this car was basically an unicum. But there was nothing to do about this now.

"Are you alright?", she asked quietly over the communication line.

"Have been better", Heidenstein responded. "But I am alright."

Looking into the rear-vision mirror she saw blood on his jacket those he did not seem to bleed anymore. "Don't bleed on my back seat, okay?"

"I'll do my best", he replied dryly.

She quickly drove to the next better trafficked road where another attack was less likely. With a look at the wing mirror she realized that she had reached the traffic just in time as she could see another drone in the sky. But it did not attack.

So in a way she was glad once they reached the underground garage where they were supposed to meet the Johnson. She considered it not likely the drone was to follow them underground and she was right.

She drove down to the third underground layer of the garage, where they found the Johnson waiting together with six orks in suits – bodyguard apparently. The Johnson himself was an older man – Pakhet estimated him to be between fifty and sixty years old – human, but of very athletic build. The way he held himself he had the charisma of a person who was used to being in charged. Maybe a security manager, she speculated. He was holding a briefcase and looked at them expectingly.

As there was no empty parking lot right beside the big van in front of which the human and the orks were standing, Pakhet took a space about fifteen meters away.

"Well, get out", she ordered Gronbach, while getting out of the car herself.

"I'll stay at the car", Heidenstein said over the commlink after getting out of the vehicle. "Think of it as covering your back."

"Alright." She waited for Gronbach to get out, before walking over to the Johnson by his side. While approaching the Johnson she kept an eye on the orks. It was not unusual for a Johnson to bring some bodyguards along. It was meant to showcase their power – and also to keep runners from doing something stupid – but it always tended to make Pakhet a bit nervous. After all "The Johnson will always betray you" was one of the "Rules of the shadows" for a reason.

"You must be the runners who took the job to save our dear Mr. Gronbach", the Johnson said with a somewhat smug voice.

"Yes, indeed. And as you can see: We saved him. He is – mostly – unhurt", Pakhet replied and tried to hide her uneasiness.

The Johnson looked at Gronbach for a moment. "Yes, very well. Let me get him into the car, alright?" Gronbach took a step towards their van, but Pakhet grabbed him by the suite.

"What is it now?", Gronbach protested only to be ignored by her.

"One moment", she said. "We are getting paid for it, right?"

An artificial smile appeared on the Johnson's face. "Of course." He took the brief case and opened it. There was a credstick inside. "There is your money. Now would you let Mr. Gronbach go?"

"No", she replied. "You must know how this works. I can show you an empty credstick

in a briefcase. First hand the credstick over and let me check it."

The Johnson gave a sigh. "Do we really have to make this complicated?" There was an audible threat in his words saying basically: There can be different sorts of complications.

"I am afraid we have", Pakhet replied firmly. "Now would you let me check that credstick please."

"Fine." The Johnson closed the briefcase and slid it over to her.

Even though he could not see it through her visor Pakhet shot him an evil look. She understood very well that he was counting on her letting go of Gronbach to open the case, but she did not. As he had not locked it again, she was able to open the case with a kick and took the stick with a fluid motion. There was just one problem: She had to let go of Gronbach to insert the credstick into her commlink.

"Doctor", she said out loud. "Make sure to have an eye on dear Mr. Gronbach here, would you?" This time she made sure that the threat in her words was audible.

Gronbach seemed to understand. When she took out her commlink he did not react and made no move. He only looked at her angrily. "Why are you doing this?"

She did not reply but checked the credstick. It indeed was charged with twenty thousand Nuyen. "Very well", she said and looked at Gronbach. "You may go." Then she turned toward the Johnson. "Thank you very much."

"Thank you, too", the Johnson replied and opened the back door of the van to let Gronbach inside. When the door was closed he walked around the car towards the driver's door, before turning around once more. "Well, you know what to do."

It took Pakhet a moment to realize that he was talking to his bodyguards. Just when those readied their guns and the Johnson drove off in the car she ran over to the next car, jumped over it and ducked down, just before a burst of gun fire smashed into the car's body. "Fucking drek head", she muttered before shooting back at the orks with her left cyber-gun.

Two shots, then the first ork went down.

Another burst of fire – she ducked and then fired again. The next ork went down. But this time she was not quick enough. One burst of fire hit her in the shoulder, though it did not penetrate her jacket. She shot back and the third ork fell.

It was then, that she heard gun fire behind her. Single shots and without turning around she knew it was Heidenstein, who had shot the fourth ork down. Another one stumbled backwards when he was hit, but kept standing.

Pakhet shot at the sixth ork, who went down as quickly as the other ones.

When the last ork standing realized that he was alone, he just dropped his gun and ran for his life, though he did not get far, before collapsing on the floor vomiting heavily. The entire firefight had lasted for only a few seconds – the van had just reached the to the upper levels when the last ork had dropped his gun. "Asshole!", Pakhet yelled and fired at the van's tires, even though she knew that it was no use. A moment later the van had vanished behind the corner of the ramp. "Drek..."

"You are alright?", Heidenstein asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine", she replied still with anger in her voice. "And I have the money." She looked at the vomiting ork. "What has happened to him?"

"Pepper punch", Heidenstein replied.

Well, that guy was unlucky. "Well, too bad for him. I am out of pity for today." She turned around to Heidenstein and went back to her car. "Let's go."

Heidenstein hesitated. "Are the other orks dead?"

Pakhet shrugged. "Don't know. Probably not. The bullets I use rarely penetrate

armour. They are probably knocked out." She got into the car and started it, waiting for Heidenstein. "Let's go before we get any more troubles."
For a moment Heidenstein hesitated, but then he got into the car. "Alright."

XII – Upgrades

“What is that guy doing here again?”, Robert asked without hiding his dismay.

“Well...” Pakhet looked over to Heidenstein, who was still standing outside. “He wanted to help.”

“Okay. Other question: Why did you let him?” It was not typical for Robert to be so openly hostile, but then again this was the first time she had brought another shadowrunner to his garage more than once.

Pakhet shrugged. “Because he helped me out a lot”, she replied. “And why not?”

“Because he is a shadowrunner!”, Robert exclaimed though he lowered his voice. Then he gave a sigh. “You know I am just worried for you.”

“I know”, she replied. “You worry too much.”

Robert crossed his arms in front of his chest and looked at her for a short while. Then he sighed again and handed her a key. “This is for the garage”, he said. “You will find the tools as well as the new parts inside.”

She gave a faint smile. “Thank you.” Then she stood up and went over to the door. “I’ll ask if I need anything else?” She phrased it like a question, as she was not sure whether Robert wanted her to ask for anything with Heidenstein around.

But he nodded. “Okay. Have fun, I guess.”

“Thanks”, she said again before going outside.

After the run with the six orks – how she called it now – she had made a decision. Sure, she had made enough money within two days to live from it for a few month, but as she did not plan on taking a vacation from running anytime soon she decided on spending most of the money on something she had wanted to do for quite a while: Upgrading the Jackrabbit. The confrontation with those drones had been enough to convince her that the car was in dire need for some more armour. And so she had made a call to Robert to get all the necessary materials for her so she could build them in herself.

Admittedly she had anticipated that Heidenstein would “volunteer” for helping her with it, when she had mentioned her plans to him. She had anticipated Roberts reaction as well and while Robert most certainly would have been the greater help, she had more scruples whenever she would ask him to help her for free then she had with Heidenstein.

The only thing that shocked her about this was the reasoning: Sooner or later Heidenstein would benefit from the car having good armour. There was no denying it: She was planning to accompany Heidenstein on future runs – and to ask him the same in return.

So much for keeping away from other runners.

“What took you so long?”, Heidenstein asked – though not impatiently – when she went outside.

She shrugged. “Just talked over some stuff with Mr. Schneider.” Of course she still did her best to keep her friendship with Robert a secret, as she did not want him to end up in the line of fire.

Heidenstein looked over to the window of Robert's office. “He is rather distrustful, isn't he?”

“I would say he is a realist”, Pakhet replied and opened the driver's door of the Jackrabbit. “He knows we are shadowrunners, after all.” With those words she got

into the car to drive it into the open garage.

As Robert had said she found an entire array of metal pieces and new windows inside, as well as some smaller parts and several different heavy tools additional to those included at the work bench at the wall.

After turning off the the motor and getting out of the car she looked at it and gave a sigh. No use in kidding herself: She knew this would take her several days, even with the help of Heidenstein. Stuff like this was normally done by robots but as those were not available they would have to do all of it by themselves.

Heidenstein walked into the garage. "And, how do we start?"

"That is a very good question", Pakhet muttered mostly to herself and gave a long sigh. "Well, for now the old plates need to be removed. I would say we start with the hood and work from there."

"Then I guess the hood itself goes first", Heidenstein figured.

Pakhet nodded and went over to the workbench to get the tool belt Robert had left there for her, before putting several screw drivers and a wrench into it. "It would be really helpful if you held the hood, while I unwind the screws."

"Well, then let's see how helpful I can be", Heidenstein replied. He opened up the hood, so she could access the screws and nuts, then waited for her to start.

She went over and once Heidenstein was holding the upper side of hood started to loosen all the attachments. "Just do me one favour and don't start bleeding again, okay?"

"I am fine", he replied.

"Sure", she muttered. "You just have been hit by several bullets two days ago."

"I am fine", Heidenstein repeated.

Pakhet rolled her eyes, before straightening as she had loosened the last screw.

"Offer is still standing. I could take a look at the wounds."

"Last time I checked, I was the medic."

Pakhet knew he was referencing what she had said on that run. Well, she would not make a fuzz about having some medical training, when he was too proud to take medical help from somebody else. "Whatever", she just muttered and went over to the other side of the hood.

Still she paid attention to his movement, while they were working. Even with painkillers and properly cared for injuries some symptoms would show – and so they did. With certain movements it was clear that he was injured at the left side. Due to the blood and the jacket it had been pretty hard to see where exactly he had been hit, but judging by his movements Pakhet was pretty sure that there had been a hit at the side of the shoulder as well as one just beneath the rip cage.

She wondered whether he had taken care of those injuries by himself or if he had asked somebody else – maybe one of the other doctors that most certainly worked at that hospital. Which reminded her of something else.

"Say, doc, what is up with the hospital you are working at?", she asked while she was removing one of the smaller plates at the side of where the hood had been.

Heidenstein, who was doing the same on the other side of the car, looked up. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it is a public hospital", Pakhet said before throwing the removed part in the same corner where the old hood and some of the other removed plates were lying.

"Yet it seems to be rather badly frequented."

For a moment Heidenstein was silent. "Well, I don't really know. I have just rented the space in the basement for the street clinic."

Pakhet cursed silently, when the nut holding the next part in place did not move at first. She had to be careful as thanks to the cyberarms she had bent pieces out of place before. "Means that they are pretty desperate, eh? I mean, most people don't want to be associated with any part of the shadows. And a hospital... They might be in some troubles if HanSec found out."

"It is too close to Harburg", Heidenstein replied. "HanSec does not care."

When the part finally came loose she looked over to him. Something seemed rather weird about how he replied, though she could not quite put it. "They don't?"

"No, they don't", he said. "But you might be right. The hospital is probably not as busy as it should be." The way he spoke made it clear that the topic was done for him, making Pakhet even more curious.

She was pretty sure, that Heidenstein knew more than he admitted, but she had no interest in arguing about it. Hence she dropped the topic though she made a mental note to do some research later on.

To her surprise it took them little more than two hours to strip off the plates from the car front. They had also removed the front window as this was easiest with the plates and the hood gone.

"What now?", Heidenstein asked once they had organised the stripped plates.

"How about a break?", Pakhet replied. "If we continue like this, we will be done by tomorrow." She was surprised about this herself, as she had been sure it would take them at least four or five days without the help of Robert, but it was going a lot smoother than she had imagined.

Heidenstein wiped his hands on a cloth. "I am not going to complain."

She believed him as she had noticed that he had become more and more pale over the course of the last twenty minutes or so. Apparently he was not completely healed up, just as she had thought. "How about I order us some pizza?", she suggested.

"That doesn't sound too bad." Heidenstein gave her a faint smile before sitting down on one of the folding chairs next to the work bench.

For a moment she considered sending him away, as he really was rather pale and looked more like he could use a few days of rest. Then again something told her that even if he was not here, he most certainly would not rest.

She grabbed her commlink which was lying on the workbench to place an order, before going over to a door in the back of the garage. "I'll see whether I can fetch me some coffee. You want one, too?"

"Sure", he said. "Sounds great."

"Okay. I'll see what I can do." Of course she went straight for Robert's office, where she had stored a bit of real coffee – because to hell with soykaf – but found it locked. Well, this had to mean Robert was probably in the working hall, so that was where she went next.

She was right. She found Robert talking to a costumer who apparently had just brought in his car. As she did not want to hurry him she waited for the costumer to leave, before waving at Robert.

He nodded and went over to her. "What can I do for you?", he asked.

"Coffee", she said with a faint smile.

Robert shot her a cheeky grin. "What else could it be?" He chuckled and got out the key for his office. "And, what is the Jackrabbit doing?"

"I imagine my car is feeling a bit naked right now", Pakhet replied.

"So you are progressing well?", he concluded still chuckling.

Pakhet nodded. "Better than I expected." Once they had reached the office door she

waited for him to unlock it. "Though we are taking a break for now. I ordered some pizza."

The expression on Robert's face shifted. "Pizza? And you did not ask me?"

"Well, that would make the entire 'I rented the garage' story less believable, right?", she said apologetically. Of course she knew why he reacted this way – after all the "pizza meetings" had always been their thing.

"Doesn't the real coffee do the same?", Robert asked – one eyebrow raised.

"Maybe you had some and I paid you for it", Pakhet suggested, though she knew he was right.

In disbelief he looked at her. "Yeah, I'll note you once I make enough money to afford real coffee."

She gave a sigh. "I understand what you're saying."

"So?" Robert looked at her challengingly. "Soykaf?"

Once again she rolled her eyes. Then she bit her tongue as she knew him to be right, but also really, really wanted her real coffee. In the end she gave in. "Alright. Soykaf, then."

Robert shot her a smile and started to brew up some Soykaf.

It was maybe five minutes later that Pakhet returned to her Jackrabbit and Heidenstein, who seemed still rather pale. Once again she thought about sending him away, but then once again decided against it. "Hey there", she said. "Bad news: It is only soykaf." She went over to him and handed him one of the two mugs Robert had given her.

"I am not that set on real coffee", he replied with a faint smile. "Thank you."

Pakhet shrugged and sat down on the work bench. She sipped some of the coffee and grimaced. There were people who said there was not difference in taste, but whoever said that had probably just never had a real coffee.

She looked at her commlink to see when the pizza would arrive. The timer was still at about five more minutes. She sighed.

"Have you build in those back seats yourself?", Heidenstein said nodding in the direction of the Jackrabbit.

"Yep", Pakhet replied. "Mr. Schneider helped me though. You just cannot do this stuff alone."

"So you did take apart the entire car?"

Once again Pakhet shrugged. It pretty much summoned up what they had done. After all they even had to modify the car's body. "Pretty much."

In the end of the day they actually managed to not only exchange the front plates of the car, but also the front window as well as two of the door windows. Pakhet felt some sense of accomplishment that usually came with this kind of manual work, though she also felt the need to take a shower, as of course the work had been messy, too.

The hot shower felt good and helped her relax, though she could not shake the feeling that something else was still bothering her. She was not sure what it was exactly. Maybe it was the fact that Robert was at least a little angry at her. Was it because he was envious? Probably not. Rather he was once again overly worried about her and he was probably right with this.

She was still not sure why she was not more reasonable as it was her style. Even though Heidenstein seemed to be alright it was still bad news to get too attached to another runner. She did neither want to feel bad for somebody dying on a run, nor did

she want to do something stupid to prevent something like that from happening. And there was still something off about Heidenstein and she could not really put a finger onto it.

Maybe that was what bothered her.

She went into her bedroom to cloth herself thinking about this. Why did he not want to talk about the hospital? Something seemed weird about this. Maybe he had a contract with whomever owned the hospital to not tell anything – but then why was it such a secret? It was obvious that the hospital had not as many patients as it should have.

“Oh, fuck this”, Pakhet muttered to herself while clothing herself.

Her curiosity started to bug her again – just as it had when she had gone on the run with that bunch of idiots just to find out who had been stupid or crazy enough to blow up all those explosives.

Well, in this case the answers might be found easier as the Matrix should be able to offer some sort of information about that hospital. That thought in mind she went into the living room once she was finally clothed. She took her commlink and displayed the matrix in AR.

It did not take her very long to find the matrix presence of the Anderson Hospital. Maybe there was a clue somewhere in here.

The matrix presence was clearly well crafted, though not that well maintained. She was no decker, but that much was even apparent to her. It did not take her long to find the next that seemed weird, as the list of doctors working at the hospital seemed rather small. Normally even small hospitals had twenty to thirty medical professionals while according to the matrix the number of doctors working at the Anderson hospital numbered eight in total – including the director of the hospital: Dr. Joachim Anderson.

Some more research told her that the hospital actually belonged to a company named ABC Technologies. That company was apparently one of those cases with a rather short history: Established only thirteen years ago, ruined three years ago. And it seemed that Dr. Anderson was the company's director as well.

Even though it had been ruined after just ten years the company had managed to gain A status during that time. Apparently they had mostly produced bioware, cyberware and different medical supplies.

Pakhet went through the archives of some local news as the headquarters of ABC Technologies had been in Hamburg as well. She suspected that the company had probably made too much money and therefore had caught the attention of some other company, who then had done their best to wreck them down.

What she found in the archives seemed to confirm that assumption: There had been accidents in the factories, forcing them to close down. Considering how many accidents suddenly had started to happen it had probably been sabotage. Some deliveries had gone missing – probably sabotage as well. And several hospitals had been wrecked – sounding a lot like runner teams being hired to do exactly that. The company then had made deficits and had to sell more and more of its properties, leading Pakhet to believe that there was probably not enough money to employ more professionals in the hospital.

Either that or nobody wanted to work there after all the accidents and other stuff that had happened or the company did not have the money to employ more professionals – either way that was probably the reason the hospital had barely any patients: There was still some apprehension because of things that had had happened

and there was little personal to take care of them. It would also not be surprising, if they were missing equipment if some shadowrunners had wrecked it.

That answered at least part of her question.

But one thing was still bothering her and she was not sure what it was exactly. She kept poking through the archives. That Anderson-guy who was still the director of the ruined company apparently had founded it when he was still in his early twenties. He seemed to be one of those child prodigies. From the information she was able to find about the foundation of the company he had worked with Universal Omnitech and had already had two PhDs at the time. Well, Omnitech was probably not happy with him leaving to found his own company.

It would not surprise her, if the company hiring the shadowrunners had largely been Omnitech. It was common practice to sabotage people leaving one of the big corporations – some corps tended to hire assassins just to make sure that company knowledge did not get in the wrong (meaning someone else's) hands.

A suspicion awoke in her. Maybe it was just her paranoia seeing connection where there were none, but maybe this was what had put her off all the time.

She turned off the matrix-overlay and thought about this for a moment. She was still pretty sure that Heidenstein came from an academic background meaning that he had not always lived in the shadows – but that had not to mean anything. There were many that ended up in the shadows after being blamed for some accidents, being extracted in a shadowrun or simply because they were in the way of somebody else moving up the ranks.

That Joachim Anderson also was barely older than her, while Heidenstein seemed to be in his fifties. But then again there were guys completely disguising themselves as somebody else.

It would at least explain why he did not want to talk about the hospital too much.

Well, maybe it was just her paranoia. She had nothing to go on that would suggest her hunch being right – except his academic demeanour, which could mean anything. Apart from that her hunches always tended to be wrong and she had learned to not trust any “feeling” telling her something. Some people tended to give a lot of credit to “a woman's intuition”, but she was probably not woman enough to have such a thing.

Still. At least her curiosity felt somewhat saturated. A hospital of a ruined company – which explained why parts of the hospital would be rented to a street clinic.

XIII – Dacart's mission

Pakhet had been right: It took them only three days to upgrade the Jackrabbit. After that the car was not only armoured, but had chameleon coating as well. It seemed to be somewhat useful and as it did not come her to costly she had gone with it.

It had been Robert who had helped her applying the coating to the car. It had not taken them long and she did not want him to feel left out after she had done the armouring together with Heidenstein. She also hoped that Heidenstein would take some time off to properly heal up.

Ever since they had finished up the car she had put some time into working out again – something she had let slide while first working on the weapons and then on the Jackrabbit. Some part of her still thought she should try to get some distance to Heidenstein, because she just did not want to trust him. That was, why she did not phone him during the next four days. She had to admit that it was almost an odd feeling, as she had kinda grown accustomed to all the bantering.

It was on the fifth day though, when Heidenstein phoned her.

For a moment she hesitated but then she picked up. Maybe he had a job for her after all – and she would not complain about making some more money as she had spent most of the money from the last two runs on the upgrades and also had had to pay the rent for the next month.

"Hey there, doc", she greeted him.

"Hey, Pakhet", he replied and quickly went on to the topic. "I'll make it quick: Dacart had just called me. He's got a job and he asked me to ask you to come along."

Somehow she did not trust this. Dacart had gotten hired for a run? "What kind of job?", she asked.

"Extraction in Neue Mitte. And we would need to go now."

Pakhet thought about this for a moment. "What kind of extraction? And what sort of payment?"

"A Shiawase employee is being kidnapped. Dacart said sixty thousand for the group if we get that guy out alive and unharmed", the doc replied. "Twenty thousand if he is still alive when the HTR team is coming in."

Pakhet hesitated for a moment, even though she knew she barely had the time to do so. "Is Baramesus coming along?"

"He has left the city. So I don't think so."

"Are you coming along?", she then asked.

"Yes. I'll go", Heidenstein replied after a moment.

Once again Pakhet bit her lips as she realized that she did not want Heidenstein to go there alone with those idiots. Well, drek. "Okay. I'll come. Where?"

"Shiawase office complex in Neue Mitte", Heidenstein said. "I'll send you the address. Can you pick up Kah Pak on the way?"

"Where is he?", Pakhet replied.

"Stornmann", he said.

Pakhet sighed. She was still unsure whether she liked Kah Pak. No, actually she was really sure that she did not like him. But then again they might need some magical support on the mission. "I'm on my way."

"Okay."

With that Pakhet hung up, grabbed her armoured jacket, before running outside,

grabbing the Parashield, her heavy pistol and – after a moment of hesitation – her rifle, too. With the weapons in the respective holsters she opened her garage, got into the Jackrabbit and drove off.

As it was just the early afternoon she could only hope to reach the office building in time to still make a change.

On her way to Stornmann she got an invitation from Heidenstein for some sort of videofeed. Three small video screens popped up at the side of her field of view. It seemed to be video shot by drones hovering over what happened. Pakhet turned on assisted driving before looking at the videos.

Apparently it was a live feed from what happened in that office building. The kidnappers – very clearly a group of runners – outmatched the local security. They had taken a rather slender asian looking guy behind them and he looked rather scared. Yep, clearly their mission target. The runners in sight seemed to be four guys: One was clearly a troll, another might have been an ork, the other two seemed to be human.

It was clear that the security in the building was falling back, trying to minimize their losses by being as defensive as possible. They were trying to hinder the runners, were trying to buy time, but were apparently calculating on either them or the HTR actually freeing the hostage.

She reached the point where she was to pick up Kah Pak and was relieved to find the shaman waiting by the side of the street in his running gear. She halted the car. "Get in!", she just barked at him and so he did.

Going as fast as possible without drawing in too much unwanted attention she made her way to the office building, being aided by her satnav.

Kah Pak closed his eyes and started to mumble something. Magic stuff?

"What are you doing?", she asked grimly, but did not get any reply. Well, he could have asked at least, before he started doing anything magic in her car.

She accelerated as it seemed the runners had reached one of the lower floors of the office building.

Another invitation popped up and she once again accepted it.

"Where are you?", Heidenstein asked over their communication channel.

"Almost there", she replied looking at the map of the satnav, according to which she was still ten about blocks away.

"You need to hurry", Heidenstein said.

Pakhet growled at him. "I know." She took the next turn and then the next, just while she could see how the runners reached a garage.

"Where are you?", Heidenstein hurried her.

"Almost there!", she repeated once more when she finally was able to see the building down the road. She accelerated again and saw the van of the group parked already in front of the underground garage's exit. "There we are."

Just when she brought the Jackrabbit to a hold a row of thick bars fell down at the exit – a barrage. "What's going on?"

"Slap is trying to hinder them from leaving", Heidenstein explained. "He is doing stuff in the matrix. Dacart is trying to get in there through an emergency exit. Wait a moment." Another invite, which she excepted.

"Drek!", she now heard Dacart cursing.

"What are you doing, fool?", Pakhet barked while activating her normal microphone and putting on her helmet, before taking her rifle and going outside.

Dacart was still cursing. "Well, my blow torch just blew up."

Pakhet could not help but to roll her eyes. She looked down the ramp of the garage and saw another van – a Roadmaster – driving towards the bars which just started to open up again.

“What are you doing?”, she now heard Heidenstein ask, when she readied her rifle. She knew it was directed at her, but she did not reply.

She breathed and then shot. Once. Twice. Both times directly at the window in front of the driver's seat. But the Roadmaster did not slow down. The shots did not crack the window and Pakhet had to jump aside to not be run over.

“Fuck”, she muttered, when the Roadmaster crashed into their group van. “You okay, doc?” Before she got answer she heard Heidenstein take a deep breath.

“Yeah, we seem to be alright.”

The Roadmaster made a backwards jolt, before it turned to drive away.

Pakhet cursed once again and hurried back to her car, started the motor and turned around as well, as the Roadmaster was going down the road she had come. She let the auto-pilot take over to fire several bullets at the tires of the Roadmaster, but once more to no ordeal. Well, Roadmaster's had a reputation of being tanks, but so far at least armour-piercing rounds had done at least a dent at them – making her believe this car had additional armouring as well. Great! She switched back to manual driving. Then the “team van” was next to the Jackrabbit and accelerated in an attempt to ram the other van, but the Roadmaster evaded with ease, falling back in an apparent attempt to ram Pakhet's car. Hastily she rotated the steering wheel and somehow managed to evade the Roadmaster.

It was then, that a bat just popped into existence right beside her.

“What the heck?”, she exclaimed, when the bat sat down on Kah Pak's shoulder and looked at him with some expectation.

“Go and scream at them, would you do that?”, Kah Pak said to the bat.

“Sounds fun!”, the bat replied, before flying right through the front window of the Jackrabbit as if it did not exist for her.

“What...?” Pakhet looked at Kah Pak, understanding that this had to be some sort of spirit.

But the shaman did not reply but rather had closed his eyes once again – doing some other magic stuff again.

Once again the team van tried to ram the Roadmaster and once again the Roadmaster evaded by falling back and trying to ram the Jackrabbit, this time forcing Pakhet to brake hardly. Just then a sea gull appeared on Kah Pak's knee.

“What the hell are you doing?”, she screamed at him, but once more not getting a reply.

“What should I do?”, the sea gull asked, flapping its wings.

“If you would kindly go into that car there and try to distract the people inside”, Kah Pak said to the gull.

“Yeah, can do!” Just like the bat the sea gull flew through the front window, while Pakhet tried to stay in control over her car. She was pretty sure that somebody was rigged into the Roadmaster, which evaded any attacks from the group van with ease.

“Can't you summon something bigger?”, she growled at Kah Pak, when she had to fall back once again.

Apparently he could as just a few seconds later a giant raven appeared on the hood of her car, forcing her to slow down as she was barely able to see.

“Go and frighten them!”, Kah Pak said and off the giant bird went.

Just like those birds – and the bat – seemed to have no problem flying through her

front window, they seemed to have no problem with the walls of the Roadmaster. There was a reason why Pakhet did not like spirits: They just did not make any sense! Just in that moment a cover of ice appeared on the street, forcing Pakhet to once again fight over the control the car, while their van started to slide and almost crashed into a wall, making Pakhet glad that there was no traffic on this street. But just in that moment, when she thought they had lost the Roadmaster for good the large van started to slide, too, crashing into the next car, the backlight dying instantly.

"What the...?" Pakhet did not understand what just had happened, but there was no time to think about it. Instead she got out of the car and ran for the Roadmaster just when it's windows broke completely.

This was a good thing for a change. She pulled out the Parashield and shot inside the van just when she was next to it, just before sliding to take cover next to the Roadmaster, realizing to late that the unarmoured guy who she had shot was probably the guy they were supposed to rescue. Well, at least he would not get in the way when he was down, she thought, hoping that he was not allergic again narcoject. Then the shooting started. The back doors of the Roadmaster were thrown open and people ran out of it. Pakhet looked through the side window, realizing she was not in a good position to shoot at the three fighters who apparently just run out of the van. But there was Heidenstein, too, shooting at them with his normal pistol – probably meaning he was using Pepper Punch again. But the guys shot back, hitting Heidenstein, with what seemed to be a shotgun.

"Doc, are you okay?", she shouted into the microphone, when he went down.

Well, drek.

Just then a motorcycle approached from the direction of the office building, the rider jumping of just before reaching the Roadmaster, letting the motorcycle slide at the three guys, who quickly jumped aside. This had to be Dacart, Pakhet realized, just when the rider took a pistol from a holster starting to shoot at the guys.

Paying too much attention to this Pakhet had not realized that one of the two still conscious guys in the back of the van had drawn a pistol as well, now shooting at her. In the last moment Pakhet ducked down again, somehow evading the bullet, which still graced her helmet. She ducked down, quickly glancing at the videofeed from the drones, that now seemed to hover over the battle.

What she could see was the three street sam firing at Dacart with all they had, while he jumped around like a squirrel on spiked coffee, apparently even evading explosive rounds from whatever the cannon-like weapon the troll was using was.

But once again it was the human fighter, who still had his shotgun, who managed to hit. Dacart went down.

"Drek!", Pakhet muttered, just when she jerked as a sudden pain creped into her head. She knew that kind of pain: Magic.

She looked up realizing that the mage, who had probably also summoned the ice onto the street, was just above her and apparently he was just busy doing something to her.

"Not now!", she yelled at him, grabbed him by the neck, yanked him out of the window and threw him at the wall from which she was only about a meter away.

A nasty crack sounded when the mages head hit the wall, telling her that she had probably just broken his neck. Well, fuck, but she had no time to care about this.

Looking at the videofeed it seemed that Heidenstein was up again, but had opened his med-kit.

"Are you alright, doc?", she screamed frantically.

"I am – somehow", he replied. "But Dacart is not."

Did that idiot not realize that now he took care of the stupid adept he was in point blank shooting range of the three enemies?

It was just then, that the troll with his big cannon went down, vomiting onto the street. Well, the doc was still in shooting range of two of them.

And she had no good way of shooting at them.

But there was a way. She got out her commlink and sent a command to her still running Jackrabbit to drive forward. If they were lucky the car would come to a hold just in between their enemies and the doc.

The Jackrabbit lived up to its name when it jumped forward, hitting the downed troll into the head and running over the human with his damned shotgun, while the ork somehow managed to jump aside.

Just then something came flying through the window of the Roadmaster landing right besides Pakhet.

It took her a moment to realize it was a grenade. Somehow she managed to jump away, as it went up in a flash. She ran for the Jackrabbit, hiding behind it as well. Heidenstein was still busy caring for Dacart, who – as she could now see – had taken a shot into the chest and seemed to be bleeding from several small holes.

The sound of burst fire sounded and she realized too late that it was directed at her. It hit her in the shoulder, but she did not feel bullets pierce her skin. While she ducked down to evade more bullets she took a look at her own shoulder – the bullets stuck in her jacket. "Lucky."

She shot back at the ork. One shot from a Parashield, then another one before she had to duck down again, as more burst fire hailed onto the Jackrabbit. She had missed. The ork was heavily armoured and it was pretty impossible to place one of the darts between his armour.

This would not work, so she put the Parashield away and got her Ares Predator out of the holster, to start firing at the ork with that. Like the rifle the Predator was loaded with armour-piercing rounds – meant especially for cases like that. She saw that she hit the ork in the shoulder, but somehow he still did not go down.

"What are you doing?", a voice behind her asked.

She shot a side glance to see Slap running up to her, stumbling on his way. Was he good for anything? She did not honour him with answer, but rather kept firing.

More burstfire was directed into her direction, when a white shadow darted down onto the ork. It was the sea gull, trying to peck him, it seemed, and it was too close for the ork to hit with his machine gun. Finally he stopped shooting and rather lashed out at the bird which flew up into the sky again.

Pakhet used this moment to hit the ork again, though he still did not go down. Then she realized that Kah Pak had also run to hide behind her Jackrabbit. Well, great, what were they doing? This made for a great way to motivate the stupid ork to come around to them.

The ork seemed to have the exactly same idea when he saw Kah Pak vanishing behind the Jackrabbit.

Pakhet wanted to shoot at him again, when another burst of fire hit the concrete beside her. She looked up and saw three drones up in the sky above them – not the drones filming this entire ordeal for them, but rotor-drones with gun. "Oh drek", she muttered, opened the car door and jumped inside, leaving the door open so the others could follow.

"How long until you are done, doc?", she barked.

"Just give me a few more seconds, okay?", he replied grimly.

Slap jumped into the car besides her, just while the ork was coming around the Jackrabbit. The decker left the door open, while Kah Pak jumped on the back seat, pulling the door shut.

"Fuck", Pakhet muttered when the ork reached the other side of the car. For a moment she was afraid he would just shoot Heidenstein in the head, but he completely ignored the doc and Dacart, but rather pulled a grenade from his belt, grinning at them.

"Oh, fuck! Close the door!", Pakhet yelled at Slap, who tried to pull the door shut, but the ork yanked the door open and threw the grenade inside.

"Oh, fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" Pakhet stretched out her arm to catch the grenade, but it evaded her grip. "Fuck!" She reached for it again and this time was able to close her hand around the explosive. She had only a split second to think – but she knew she could not just throw the grenade out at the ork as she would kill Heidenstein and Dacart with that, too.

So she somehow managed to yank open the door next to her and throw the grenade out, before pulling the door shut. Not a moment too soon, as the grenade exploded just a split second later, splinters hailing down onto the car, making Pakhet rather glad to have upgraded the armour just days earlier.

"Now will you pull the door shut?", she yelled at Slap, but did not get a reply. Slap had apparently collapsed in his seat and the ork was reaching for another grenade.

But then the ork jerked. Something had clearly hit him, as he seemed to be squirming. Then Dacart jumped suddenly up, pulled up his armoured vest, got out a knife and stuck it into the orks chest, who still kept standing.

The next moment mewing filled the street and before Pakhet knew what was going on a pack of cats jumped at the ork, dragging him down.

"Really, cats?", Pakhet growled at Kah Pak, as she realized that this had to be the doing of a spirit. "Can't you, I don't know, summon something big and actually useful?" Burst fire. Again. Apparently directed at the cats who seemed to run to all sides. Then another burst of fire hit the car door. It was only, when the door suddenly fell down, that Pakhet realized that the fire had not been directed at the door, but at the hinges, which were not really enforced. "Fucking rigger", she muttered when one of the drones drifted downwards and seemed to be ready to fire into the car.

Thankfully Pakhet still had the Predator in her left hand. She switched it into her right and fired at the drone, shooting it out of the air. Then, in the next moment the fire stopped.

After a few seconds of silence Pakhet dared to look out the passenger's door. The other drones were landing.

"You are welcome", Slap said, as he opened his eyes.

She ignored him, as somebody else was running out of the Roadmaster – the guy who had thrown the other grenade at her, probably the decker.

Pakhet got out of the car and shot at him two times, before lowering her gun. Well, if he was fleeing he would not be a problem for them anymore.

But Dacart seemed to think differently: He started running, together with the cats, trying to shoot him with his pistol. Somehow the decker evaded the first and the second shot and also managed to not be bitten by any of the cats. But then his luck ended. One of Dacart's bullets hit him in the head it seemed, as he instantly collapsed onto the street.

And like this everything ended. All of the other runners seemed to be either unconscious or dead.

The gull spirit landed on the top of the road master. "Well, that was fun. What are we going to do now?"

"I would say, we should try our best to get away", Pakhet said and turned around. Then she remembered something and ran around to take a look at Heidenstein. She was glad to find him conscious again, though he seemed to be a bit groggy.

"Are you alright, doc?", she asked, perching down next to him.

"Yeah", he replied. "I am fine. Don't worry."

She looked at him, but from what she was able to see, he was not bleeding, even though his hands were bloody thanks to Dacart. "Okay", she then said and stood up. "Well, we should grab all our things and then just go!"

She ran over at the Roadmaster to take a look at their extraction target and was relieved to find him only unconscious. So she lifted him up and carried him over to the Jackrabbit, laying him down onto the backseat.

HanSec would be here very soon and she had no interest to try and explain all of this to them. She took her heavy pistol, as well as her rifle and handed both to the doc. "Take those. I might be able to explain him being in the car – but not those things."

Heidenstein nodded. "Okay."

"Hey, what are we doing about them?", Dacart yelled over to them, pointing at the bodies of the other runners.

For a moment Heidenstein hesitated. "Are they dead or unconscious?"

"I think they are dead", Dacart replied.

"Well..." Heidenstein sighed. "We can take them with us, I guess. They seemed to be pretty cybered up and I might be able to sell their ware."

"Sounds great", Slap agreed.

"And we can take their gear", Dacart said, while helping Kah Pak to carry the bodies over to the van.

It was just when they had taken the rigger, who still had been inside the Roadmaster, to the van, that Dacart stood still, staring at the ground. "Oh man!", he exclaimed and picked up the weapon the troll had carried. "I can't believe it. This is a Krim Cannon!"

"And thus a highly illegal weapon", Pakhet muttered, while getting into her own car. She was pretty sure she had heard sirens in the distance.

"I need it!", Dacart whispered. "I need this weapon."

"Yeah, sorry to burst your bubble. But we are not taking this along", Heidenstein said. Dacart picked up the weapon, which was troll sized and hence almost of the same height as Dacart himself, then picked up the motorcycle. "Then I'll take it!", he exclaimed, starting the motorcycle.

"Wait! Idiot! That is my motorcycle!", Heidenstein yelled, when Dacart started the vehicle, still experimenting with how to carry the weapon while driving. In the end he clamped it between his legs, before accelerating the motorcycle and driving off.

Even though nobody was able to see it, Pakhet raised her eyebrow watching him leave. Then she shook her head. "Why do I get the feeling he is compensating for something?"

XIV – Decisions

When Dacart was gone, there was no further doubt: There were sirens in the distance. Pakhet looked around and was glad to not see any HanSec car. But she really did not want to risk anything.

"I'll bring our target to the Johnson", she said.

"Should I come along?", Heidenstein offered.

She looked over at him. He was still standing – or rather leaning – against the group van.

"You can barely stand. I'll do this. It is better that way. I have an explanation why he is with me at least."

Heidenstein did not seem to have any interest in arguing. "Okay."

"I still think she shouldn't go alone", Slap said.

She looked over at him, before starting the car. "Well, tough luck." The last thing she wanted, was to take him along.

And while he did not seem to like this, he did not anything to hinder her from driving away. She still could see a police car cutting around a corner, while she was driving away, but just a moment later the sea gull dashed down at it, very effectively hindering their view by doing its business on the car's front window. Well, shit.

But then she remembered something else and phoned Michael.

"Well, hello my dear, so nice of you to call me", Michael said.

"Cut it of, Micha", she replied. "I've something to ask of you." She gave him the coordinates where the fight had taken place. "There is a Roadmaster. Broken down. But I think I can repair it. I want you to sent somebody to get it for me."

"Why don't you get it yourself?", Michael asked with a sly tone in his voice.

"Because the thing is hot and I don't have the means to get it away from there", she replied.

"How hot?"

"Novahot", she replied with a sigh.

For a moment Michael seemed to consider this. "Very well. Give me five thousand and I'll see what I can do. No guarantees, though."

Pakhet sighed and thought about this. Five thousand and no guarantee. Well, it was worth a try. And normally Michael did not like to fail on such simple tasks. "Okay. I'll transfer the money."

"Very well", Michael said. "It's so nice to do business with you."

Pakhet growled. "Well, now get to work." She hung up and concentrated on driving.

And even though Pakhet would not have thought so, she managed her drive to the north of Neue Mitte without any unwanted attention – even though the Jackrabbit was missing a door and had several bullet holes in its body. But somehow she reached the address Heidenstein had sent her without being stopped or being pursued by HanSec.

But when she reached the address she cursed. Great, another underground garage. Right. After it went so well the last time. Now she wished she had accepted Heidenstein's offer to accompany her, even though she knew that he would have been more of a problem then anything else, if they had been stopped.

Well, what choice did she have? She drove into the garage, just to find a stern looking Japanese man in a well tailored suit surrounded by almost twenty security guards – mostly human – with formal attire and rifles.

"Oh, damn it", Pakhet muttered to herself, but got out of the car. "You are Mr. Johnson?", she asked the stern looking man.

"Indeed I am", the man said in a pleasant voice. "You are not Dacart, though."

Pakhet thought about the adept who probably had been captured by HanSec by now. "I am afraid Dacart is indisposed. But I have got your man." She opened the back door of the Jackrabbit, never completely letting the bodyguards out of her view. Then she carried the still unconscious run target out of the car. "We tranquillized him to reduce the chances of him getting hurt in the fire fight", she lied. "But he is fine."

"Very well", the Johnson said and waved, just so that a team of medics came over to her with a stretcher on which she placed the man.

The medics checked his pulse and attached him to a biomonitor, before nodding at the Johnson.

"I hope the run did go over without any complications", the Johnson then said, looking over at the beat up car.

"Yes, there have been no unexpected complications." Another lie but Pakhet was still wearing her helmet – something that was not unusual in situations like this.

"That's good", the Johnson said with a faint smile and waved again. This time one of the guards brought over a small briefcase to him, which he then handed over to Pakhet. "You'll find a certified credstick with the agreed payment inside. You may check it, if you want."

For a moment Pakhet looked at him – she really did not feel like being perforated with holes, while checking the stick, but she also did not want to just take it without checking it. So she got the credstick out of the briefcase, while also releasing the safety of her left cyber-gun. The stick was charged with sixty thousand – just like Heidenstein had said. "Everything seems to be in order", she concluded and looked at the Johnson. "Then I will go now."

"Of course", the Johnson said. "Though I have one more question if you allow."

"Yes", she said a bit wary.

"Might I have your name and a way to contact you?", the Johnson asked. "We might have further use of your abilities."

Pakhet considered this. This guy, who spoke with a heavy Japanese accent, had at least so far not shot at her – bonus points for that. But he was a Johnson. Of course, he was a Shiawase Johnson, from all she knew, and Shiawase had a rather good reputation with runners. Well, to hell with this. "The name is Pakhet. You can reach my fixer with this number." She gave him the number of Michael.

"Well, thank you very much, Miss Pakhet", the Johnson said with the same formal smile as before.

"Thank you", she replied and slowly returned to the Jackrabbit. She hinted at a bow, as she knew it was custom with the Japanese, before getting into the car and starting it.

The security guards saluted, but did not seem to get ready to attack her.

So she just drove out of the garage without any complications. She breathed with relief, once she was on the road again and made sure to bring some distance between herself and the garage, before she phoned Heidenstein.

Thankfully he picked up rather quickly. "Yes?"

"Pakhet here", she said. "I've got the money. Where do we meet?"

"I am at the hospital together with everyone else", he replied. "So it is probably best if you come here."

"Okay." She looked at the hole beside herself, where once the door had been. "I'll

make a detour. I will be there in about an hour."

"Understood", Heidenstein answered. "Take care."

"I will." She hung up and gave her sat-nav the command to find a route circumventing most control points.

After quite a long detour through the outer districts of Hamburg Pakhet finally arrived in front of the Anderson Hospital a little less than one hour later – just as she had said. She drove onto the parking lot and around the hospital to where the entrance of the street clinic was. To her surprise she found the gate of what should have been a garage for ambulances open and the team van, as well as a motorcycle parked inside. The others – meaning Heidenstein, Kah Pak and Slap – were inside, too. When Heidenstein saw the Jackrabbit he waved her to drive into the garage, too, making her wonder whether the hospital did not even have any ambulances left.

"Is everything alright?", she asked.

"Yeah, we are fine", Heidenstein replied. "Dacart is less so."

Pakhet looked at him with surprise. "You mean he is not on his way to Big Willy?"

"Yep", the doc answered. "I literally had to cuff him to a bed, though. Because he thinks he is alright."

"After having taken a flachette round into the chest?", Pakhet replied amused.

Heidenstein rolled his eyes. "Exactly. I pumped him full with painkillers and adrenalin before. But he thinks he just does not have any pain."

A sadistic part of her felt amused by the thought. "Well, I look forward to the painkillers will lose their effect."

The doc shot her a look, but did not say anything to her comment. Rather he closed the garage door and went over to the pretty dented van. "Well, now that you are here, you could help with those." He opened the back door of the van, revealing two dead bodies. The first was the human fighter, the other Pakhet assumed to be the rigger, as he had some nasty cuts that were probably made by the beak of a bigger bird.

She sniffed. "What about them?"

"Their ware", Slap said a bit impatiently. "Doc said he can sell it, remember. Might make some money."

Pakhet looked at the two bodies. Other than some other street samurai she had met, she never had enjoyed killing and even tried to not kill – but in many times people did not leave her much of a choice. Still, butchering them up for their ware seemed a bit disrespectful to her, even though she knew that this was unreasonable sentimentality. Slap was somewhat right: They would not need their ware anymore and she knew very well how much one could make selling used cyberware. "Okay", she finally agreed.

Together with Kah Pak she heaved the two bodies onto a stretcher, before helping bringing them into an OR inside the street clinic. Heidenstein got into a lab coat and put on gloves, before getting scalpel and other tools.

"Is there anything we can help with?", chrome-head asked.

"Do you know anything about medicine?", Heidenstein replied with faint hope in his voice.

"Nope, not really", Slap answered.

"Then, no", Heidenstein said.

It was then that Kah Pak turned around to Pakhet. "What about the payment?"

Without saying anything Pakhet got the credstick out of her pocket. "Sixty Thousand.

Divided by five that would make twelve thousand per head."

"Make that divided by four", Heidenstein said looking up from the body he was cutting open. "Dacart grabbed the hacker's Cyberdeck and I think I will keep it."

"What do you want with a deck?", chrome-head asked.

"I know a bit about hacking, too", Heidenstein answered matter-of-factly.

"Well, there is something else", Pakhet said. "I've paid somebody to get those guy's Roadmaster to safety."

"So?" Slap looked at her.

Pakhet shrugged. "So I thought you might want to have a new 'team van'? A Roadmaster is a fucking tank."

"Why do you care about that?", Kah Pak said.

She shrugged again. "It was just a thought. I can also just sell the thing after giving it a general overhaul."

"You know what?" Heidenstein once more looked up from his work. "How about I give you ten thousand, buy up the old team van and compensate you for the Roadmaster. I guess we could fix it up together?"

"Fine by me", Pakhet replied with a sigh. "Though I don't think we can use Schneider's garage again."

"I'll think of something", Heidenstein replied before looking over at Kah Pak and Slap.

"Well, I guess that's okay", Kah Pak said.

Slap just shrugged.

For a moment Pakhet hesitated, as there was something else. "What about the drones?", she asked as she had seen the three rotor-drones, three spy-drones and a rigger console in the van as well.

"I wanted to sell them", Slap said.

"Well, I would keep them." Pakhet crossed her arms. "If nothing else they might work for a good distraction."

"You know what they are worth?", Slap replied.

"Not that much used on the black market", she just said.

"And don't forget that this will make for some more money", Heidenstein said.

"Well, fine", Slap finally gave in.

"Great", Pakhet said and looked over at the bodies. Then she decided that she really did not want to sit around while Heidenstein took them apart. "I'll take a look at the vehicle damage."

Well, it did not took Pakhet too long to establish, that both vehicles were heavily damaged. The Jackrabbit was still better off then the van. Of course the door was missing, but as it was one of the front doors it would be rather easy to get a replacement. She would have to get new hinges, too, and repair some of the dents in the plates. Apart from that the chameleon coating would need some work, but while that would be costly it would not be hard work in any way.

The van on the other hand had not only a completely dented side where the Roadmaster had crushed into it, but the car body itself had taken damage from that crash. That would be harder to repair, though she was sure that Robert would be able to get the materials she would need.

While she was inspecting the damage, she received a message: "I've got the car. Brought it into a garage." Coordinates of the garage were attached.

She thought about calling Robert, but she did not want to force any interaction between Robert and Michael. This meant, she would need to rent a wrecker to

transport the broken Roadmaster herself.

As she had nothing better to do, she started to pull the rest of the destroyed hinges out of the door opening of the Jackrabbit. She had found a toolbox in this garage and had decided that Heidenstein probably would not mind. Once she had finally managed to get the hinges loose, she went to work on the dents.

"That armouring really paid off, didn't it?", she heard a voice behind her.

"It did", she said and turned around to Heidenstein. "We probably would've been dead without it."

"Yep", he agreed. "You see, I thought about getting a proper equipment for repairing the cars in here."

Pakhet raised an eyebrow. "Doesn't the hospital have any ambulances?"

"It doesn't." Was it imagination or did Heidenstein evade her gaze? While it was hard to read something into cyber-eyes it seemed to her as if he did. "I've talked to the owner about renting this space for a while."

"Okay", Pakhet said though she did clearly remember her assumption from only a few days before. "Then we could start getting to work on the van." She knocked on the dented door of the old team van. "And the new one, too, I guess." Silently she cursed herself when she realized what she was saying.

"That's what I thought", Heidenstein replied. "How long do you think it would take to get the tools?"

"The tools? Let me do a few phone calls and give me the money and we should have them within two hours. It will be harder though to get all the repair parts for the van." She looked at the bend in cross-bracing. "May I ask what you are planning to do with it?"

This time it was clear to see that Heidenstein hesitated. "Well, as I said, I talked to the owner of the hospital and we thought that we actually could rebuild the van into an ambulance. It would belong to the hospital but I might be able to take it along on runs, if they are too dangerous."

Yeah, sure, Pakhet thought to herself, but did not say anything. "That doesn't sound too bad."

"Exactly", Heidenstein replied.

She looked at him and for a moment was tempted to ask about Dr. Anderson. She was still not quite sure, but all the "Yeah, that is allowed" just seemed too much. If that Anderson-guy had managed to bring that company up to an A-rank corporation, would he really be willing to risk everything by closely cooperating with shadowrunners? Well, if there was anything left to risk, that would be. After all it seemed to be hard to believe that the hospital did not even have any ambulances left.

"Say", she finally started another question, "what are you going to do with the dead bodies? You cannot leave them lying around, can you?"

His expression quickly became grim. "Well, I've phoned a friend to take care of them." He paused. "You don't like it, right?"

She shrugged it off. "I see that it would be a waste and that it does not make that much of a difference, because there is a good chance that HanSec won't threat this with more respect as for them they will probably just be John Does. It just seems... Wrong."

"I know", Heidenstein replied. He took a deep breath, before looking over to the van again. "Well, if you can get all the tools, then be my guest. I'll pay for it, just tell me how much."

"A few thousand, probably", she said and fumbled her commlink out of her pocket.

For a moment she considered whether she was to call Robert or Michael, as she was rather sure that either would be able to get the necessary tools for her. She then decided on calling Robert – for one thing, he would not try to get more money out of it then reasonable, and he was also much more trustworthy then Michael.

She was able to reach him rather quickly and he promised to have somebody bring over the tools as well as a work bench and all the repair parts she needed for the Jackrabbit within a few hour. At least the tools should be there. He was not sure about the repair parts.

"So we wait?", Heidenstein asked when she told him about the results of her phone call.

"Seems that way", she replied. "You don't happen to have coffee here, do you?"

A faint grin appeared on his face. "Soykaf, yes, real coffee not so much."

"Well, great", she muttered.

He chuckled. "You are not at all spoiled, are you?"

"I am not – I just don't like soykaf. It does taste nothing like real coffee."

"And I always thought this was about the caffeine." Heidenstein smiled and went for the door that connected the garage to the hospital. "Let's go in. Well, at least if you want soykaf."

"I don't have much of a choice, have I?", she replied and followed him. "And it isn't just about the caffeine. It's also about the taste." She paused. "Do you at least have something to eat in your clinic? Because I'm getting hungry."

"I'll see what I can do", he said with a smile. "That is if soybread is good enough for you."

"Well, I can live through it", she replied shrugging again.

Waiting for the tools to arrive or Robert to phone again, they sat down in a small office in the street clinic. From somewhere Heidenstein got soybread as well as some cheese – at least it was real cheese, Pakhet noticed somewhat relieved, as she really hated the texture of that artificial stuff. It had been hard enough to teach her kitchen how to use real cheese.

"So, what are you going to do now?", Heidenstein asked after a while.

She looked up. "What?"

"The group", he clarified. "Are you willing to keep running with them?"

She nipped on the soykaf, then shrugged. "I don't know. What about you?"

He shrugged to. "As I said before: I was hired by Schmidt for something bigger – as was the rest of them. Schmidt wanted to train them, to make a team out of them, so I'll keep with them till then." He made a short pause. "And offering them a new van sounded kinda as if you were going to stay, too."

Rolling her eyes she took a bite of the bread. "Well, maybe. Depending on what kind of run they drag along next." Somehow she knew that she would life to regret this decision, but then again she maybe did not even have much of a choice.

Heidenstein shot her smiled at her. "Okay."

"How are you, by the way?", she asked.

He raised an eyebrow. "Good, why?"

"Because I've seen you being hit", she replied cautiously. Not to mention, that he was still rather pale, she thought to herself, but did not say it.

"You've been hit, too", he said.

She shook her head. "At the arm. That rarely counts with these." Just to put emphasis on this she showed her cyber guns. "It's all chrome."

Now it was Heidenstein who rolled his eyes. "Well, okay. But I'm fine. And you should

be careful with the the arms, too."

"I know", she said with a sign. "I know."

It was not long before Heidenstein went to take care of Dacart, who seemed to finally have noticed that indeed he was pretty injured. This meant though that Heidenstein remained short on an answer to her question. It was apparent, that even as a medical expert he was completely blind when it came to his own injuries. For a while she considered to offer him help, but as she thought it less likely that he would accept that kind of aid.

As chrome-head and the shaman had obviously already left and there was nothing else to do for her, Pakhet went back to the garage to see whether there was anything she would already be able to do. With the equipment from the toolbox she had found she started to try to remove the completely bended side doors of the "team van". But it was not possible. The doors were simply to bend and she was pretty sure she would need a crowbar to force them open.

"Can I be of any assistance?", Heidenstein asked, when he finally returned.

"No", she replied firmly. She looked at him. By now he was rather pale. "You should lie down", she added with a softer voice.

He shook his head. "I am fine."

"You are not", she said. "Take your own pulse. I bet you that it way too slow. Just look at yourself."

For a moment she thought that he would again argue about it, but then he sighed.

"Maybe you are right."

She eyed at him. "Go home, lie down. That is, if it is okay for me to stay here to wait for the tools."

"I cannot go home", he replied. "I have to take care of Dacart."

"How is he?", she asked.

"Asleep, for now."

Pakhet sighed. "Well, at least lie down for a while."

At this Heidenstein rolled his eyes, but then nodded. "Maybe you are right."

XV – Dr. Anderson

It was half past five when Robert called about somebody bringing over the requested tools, but he had not been able to get a hand on the repair parts for the Jackrabbit. So once the tools had arrived at the hospital, Pakhet started to get to work on the former team van. At least with the tools she was able to get the bend doors off the vehicle – though it was hard work even with the help of cyber-arms. In the end she had to grind the doors open with an angle grinder.

She had worked several hours when Robert sent a message saying that he would have the repair-parts for the Jackrabbit the next morning.

“Well, great”, she muttered looking at her car. She was not keen to drive it through Hamburg. When she drove to the hospital she had been lucky to not get stopped by HanSec and she was not interested in challenging her luck again.

It was already past ten and by now she started to feel tired as well. She went inside and down to street clinic in the basement. “Doc?”, she asked into the empty hallway. “Heidenstein?” Nobody replied.

She considered for a while. Either he actually had gone home or he was passed out somewhere. “Doc?”, she tried again and went to his office in the hope to find him there – but she did not.

After ten minutes of searching she had to conclude that the only person in the street clinic was Dacart, who still seemed to be out cold.

“Well, great”, she murmured, thinking about what she should do. For a moment she thought about calling Heidenstein on the commlink, but then scrapped that plan. She could call herself a taxi but then she would have to make sure that she would be back in time to bring in the repair parts. In the end she decided against it.

She went back into the room where the passed out Dacart was lying in one of the hospital beds, got the blanket and pillow of one of the three empty beds and brought both to Heidenstein's office. She had considered for a moment to sleep in the Jackrabbit, but even with the additional backseat it was a rather small car, while she was a rather tall woman. She had slept in the car before, but it never had been incredibly comfortable. Sure, it was not as if the stretcher inside the office made for a good sleeping surface either – but it was better then laying huddled up on the back seat.

Admittedly it was partly, too, just to provoke a reaction from the doc. Would he for once be at least annoyed? He could not be Mr. Nice Guy all the time.

With that thought in mind she went to sleep – somewhat thankful for having learned to sleep pretty much everywhere and for the ability to wake up rather quickly once somebody approached.

This time, though, she woke up just when the light in the office was turned on. Thanks to the flare-compensation of the cyber-eyes she was able to properly see within a few milliseconds.

“What are you doing here?”, Heidenstein asked.

“Sleeping, as you can see”, she answered with a yawn. A short gaze at the time display told her, that it was just before 2a.m.

It was clear that Heidenstein was irritated by this, but somehow he still was not angry.

“But why are you sleeping here?”

Pakhet gave a long sigh. “Because I need to be here in the morning, it was late, I could

not find you."

"Then why didn't you call me?", he asked, but she only shrugged.

"Didn't want to interrupt your well deserved rest", she said, now making him sigh.

For a moment he paused thinking about something as it seemed. "Follow me", he then said somewhat condescendingly. "I've a guest room upstairs."

She raised an eyebrow. "Upstairs?"

"Yes, the top floor", he said and seemed to wait for her to stand up and follow him.

After a moment of consideration she shrugged and got up to follow him, as he went down the hallway of the small street clinic which looked just like any other hospital corridor. It was clear he was going to the elevators at the end of the hallway which just made sense if they were going to the top-floor.

"Are there no rooms for patients up there?", she asked while waiting for the elevator to reach the top floor.

"No", Heidenstein replied. "Not right now."

Pakhet did not say anything to this but could not help but to remember her theory from just a few days ago.

With a "pling" the elevator arrived at the seventh floor where it opened to an empty hallway, with closed doors to the sides.

"Here", Heidenstein said and used a rather old-fashioned ID-card to unlock the door.

Behind the door lay not another random hospital room, but what appeared to be a living room. While the furnishing was rather austere, there was a sofa with a fitting low table, as well as a trideo and multiple shelves at the walls.

Pakhet could not help but shoot Heidenstein a side gaze. "You live here?"

"Yes", he said with a sigh. "I rented some rooms as they were barren either way."

Sure, Mr. Anderson, Pakhet thought but kept it to herself. She did not want to argue about it as she was sure he would deny it.

Heidenstein guided her to a door besides a media-shelf and opened it. "You can sleep here, for now", he said. "But really, next time just call me and ask."

"Okay", she replied and looked at him. What was he thinking? This was really not what she had expected to happen.

He hesitated for a moment. "And, Pakhet?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"Just do me a favour and don't tell anyone else, that I live here", he said.

At this she gave a faint smile. "That goes without saying."

"Good." He smiled, too. "Well then, have a good night's sleep. I'll go to work."

"Okay", she replied. "And thank you, Doc."

He nodded before going back to the elevator, while she closed the guest bedroom's door and sat down on the bed. Like the living room the furnishing was austere and reminded her more of the sterile furnishing-style of some modern hotels. The floor was linoleum, like in the rest of the hospital and there was only a small wardrobe at the end of the bed, as well as a small nightstand at the head of it.

She sighed unsure of what to do now – sleep, of course, but what was about Heidenstein or rather Dr. Anderson. On the one hand she was tempted to address the issue how easy it had been to find out about his identity, but then again she was not sure whether that would be the right approach. Something told her, that he would not listen to her.

But she had to admit, this was not what she had expected. Of course even having the suspicion, that he was Anderson she could not have known that he actually lived in the hospital. Even if she had known, she could not have seen this coming. In the shadows

distrust kept one alive. Nobody except Robert and Michael knew where she lived and she had put some effort into keeping it this way. Never would she let anyone know where she was living and so she would never have been able to foresee some other runner letting her into his house – or in this case in his few rooms inside a hospital. She sighed. Why would he be so stupid to trust her? Considering what she had read about Anderson and what she had seen from Heidenstein she could not help herself but conclude that he had to be one of the most genius idiots or the most idiotic genius in town.

Maybe she should be more wary, a voice in her head said. This could be a trap. After all she knew what happened in some street clinics and she felt rather attached to both of her kidneys. But she did not even really consider Heidenstein to do something like that. He was just too Mr. Nice Guy for that.

She sighed, shook her head and then got up to turn off the light, before lying down and going once again back to sleep.

Pakhet awoke with both her kidneys still in place about four hours later. It took her only a moment to remember, where she was. Once more she chided Heidenstein an idiot but then took a look at her commlink to see whether Robert had already sent an estimate when she would get her repair parts. He had not – at least not yet.

She gave another sigh and cursed the fact, that she had not taken her own motorcycle along before. She was hungry and neither of the vehicles here would suffice for getting something to eat as they were just too notably damaged as they were.

Still, she wanted breakfast and most of all she wanted real coffee. Making a mental note to start having a small emergency stock of real coffee in her car, she got up to search for Heidenstein. She took her jacket and left the room.

He was not in his make-shift apartment – though she had not thought him to be – and so she left the apartment to look for him in the street clinic, but once again found only Dacart, who seemed to be awake by now.

"Hey, Pakhet!", he greeted her.

"Morning", she replied grumbly. "Have you seen the doc?"

"Heidenstein?" Dacart shook the head. "I've seen him... Twenty minutes ago or so."

"Well, great", she murmured.

"If you find him, would you kindly ask him to unbind me?" He lifted his left hand which was apparently cuffed to the bed. "I really need to do something."

Pakhet raised an eyebrow. "Like going to the toilet?"

"No, like getting the weapon I hid back!" Dacart said this in an enthusiastic tone, as if he could not imagine anything better.

"I am afraid, you'll have to ask the good doctor yourself", Pakhet replied with a sigh.

She left Dacart to himself and wondered how long it would take him to free himself. There was no way that he was sane enough to stay put because something as "minor" as a shot to the chest. He was a complete fool after all.

Once more she went upstairs, this time to see whether she would find Heidenstein in the garage, which she did indeed.

Heidenstein had taken one of the drones – apparently the one she had shot down the day before – and put it on the work bench and was taking it apart.

"Upgrading to drone repair?", Pakhet asked.

"More or less", he replied while unscrewing a broken piece of metal, that was fixed to the side of the electric motor. When the motor lay bare he looked up. "Did you sleep well?"

"Well enough", she replied. "But I'm in dire need of coffee."

"Soykaf?", Heidenstein offered, but Pakhet shook her head.

"I'm sorry, but the spoiled girl really wants her real coffee." She looked around in the garage and her gaze was caught by Heidenstein's motorcycle. It had a few scratches from Dacart's stunt the day before, but apart from that it seemed to be intact. "Would you mind loaning me your motorcycle so I could get some coffee and proper breakfast?"

He looked over at the motorcycle and seemed to consider for a moment. "Aren't the repair parts for your beloved car coming soon?"

"I don't know, R... Mr. Schneider did not call me yet", she replied, just grasping control of herself to not say "Robert". "And I don't think it would take me terribly long."

"You do know that is the motorcycle on which Dacart had a pursuit with HanSec carrying a highly illegal weapon, right?"

She gave a faint smile. "Yeah, I know. But I've noticed you already replaced the number plate and probably the grid signature." Looking at his face she knew that she was right. "And speaking of Dacart, I'll bet you, that he'll try to escape sooner or later – to get the aforementioned highly illegal weapon."

"He is still badly hurt", Heidenstein muttered.

"I know that. He... I am not that sure", she replied and shrugged. "Now, will I get my coffee?"

Rolling his eyes, he looked at her. "Fine. Though I kinda feel like I might regret this."

He got the key out of his jacket. "But make sure to be back, soon."

"Sure", she replied and took the key. "Should I bring you anything for breakfast?"

He thought about this. "Well, I've had breakfast already. But I wouldn't say no to a sandwich."

"I'll see what I can do", she said with a smile, before going over to the motorcycle.

"See you in a bit." With that she started the motorcycle and drove off.

It did not take her long to get a few sandwiches at a supermarket as well as some real coffee. Just for good measures – and because she really felt like she needed it – she also bought a plastic cup of freshly boiled coffee at a coffeeshop she drove by on her way back.

Just when she was about to leave her commlink started to vibrate. She quickly picked up as she could see Robert's number displayed.

"Good morning, Joanne", he greeted her.

"Morning", she replied. "Please say, you've good news."

"I have", he answered. "The parts have just arrived."

She sighed. "Finally."

Not surprisingly Pakhet spent most of her morning with the repairs of the Jackrabbit, though Heidenstein helped her. He seemed to be better which was why she did not hinder him from doing so. Of course the most pressing repair was the new door, but after properly attaching it, there were still dents in some of the plates. Apart from that Pakhet had had to order more chameleon coating as some of it was chipped off – not to mention that the new door had no such coating.

When they were finally done and the Jackrabbit looked mostly like new, the garage smelled of varnish, burned metal and plastic.

"Well, number one is crossed off the list", she said and leaned back into one of the chairs Heidenstein had gotten for them.

"Which leaves only two badly damaged vans", Heidenstein said.

"One of which I'll still have to get here", she sighed.

Heidenstein smiled. "Well, we are in no hurry."

"Unless those idiots find the next run completely out of their league within a few", Pakhet muttered grimly.

"Then I'm afraid they'll have to walk", Heidenstein said. "But I think I know what will be the next run either way."

Pakhet raised an eyebrow. "You do?"

His smile became a bit more smug then it had been before. "Well, I've spoken with Slap yesterday and asked him to get some information. If he manages to do so, I'll be the next Johnson hiring 'the team'."

"You mean the Chaos Crew", Pakhet replied dryly.

"If you want to call them like this: Yes."

Pakhet gave a long sigh. "But why won't you hire a group of runners, who are actually good for something?"

"Because that would be too expensive", Heidenstein said sighing himself.

Pakhet shot him a side glance waiting for him to elaborate, before asking: "Then what do you want the Chaos Crew to do?"

"Well, I want some proper equipment for the shadow clinic", he said. "And, well, the owner of the hospital really needs some laboratories. So I asked Slap to see whether he can find a corporate hospital that has not yet opened, where we could get the equipment."

Once more she had to fight down the urge to say something about him talking about the "owner of the hospital", but she managed to stay silent about it. "Let's say Slap finds such a hospital", she replied, "how are we going to transport all the stuff? That will certainly be more than what fits in a van."

Heidenstein nodded. "I know. I will probably have to hire a rigger – as well as some muscle to carry the equipment."

"Hurray", Pakhet muttered, making him look at her inquiringly. She shrugged. "Just thinking that for once I'll not have to carry everything by myself."

"So that means you would come along?", he asked somewhat hesitantly.

Again she shrugged but shot him a faint smile. "I guess so..." She paused for a moment. "What kind of laboratories are you thinking about?"

Once again she noticed that Heidenstein was hesitating. "Well, the hospital really needs laboratories and equipment for producing bioware – as well as cyberware, though... That might be the harder part."

"Why?", Pakhet asked once more raising an eyebrow.

"Because cyberware nowadays is often produced with the help of nanoids... And... Well, have you heard of CFD?"

"CFD like in 'one of the best reasons to not stick your fingers into an unknown viscous liquid'?", she replied. It was one of those things she had heard from in rumours: Nanoids that were infected with a virus would act like an actual biological virus once they had entered a metahuman body, ending with an A.I. taking over the human brain. Creepy, though it were only rumours from what she knew.

"Yep, that one", Heidenstein replied. "The owner of the hospital would hence prefer a more old fashioned cybertech laboratory. But you won't find that in a new hospital."

"True", Pakhet admitted. "Well..." She paused for a moment to think. While she did not want to be too demanding, there was something she had wanted for a while now.

"Say, doc, if we got that equipment... Would it be possible to upgrade me a bit?"

Heidenstein did not reply instantly but rather watched her for a moment. "What

exactly are you thinking about?"

"Let's just say, that right now the rest of my bodies is not quite on par with my arms", she replied.

"Are you talking about cyber-legs?", the doc asked, but Pakhet shook her head.

True, she once had had her arms replaced not out of medical necessity but to improve further then training would allow, but the thought of being just a torso without the chrome had always freaked her out. There was a reason why she had decided against wired reflexes. "I'm more thinking of bioware."

"That would be possible, yes", Heidenstein replied.

"Good", she said.

For a few seconds there was silence before the doc spoke again: "I'll tell you something: If we manage to get all the equipment I need from some corporate hospital, I could offer you the upgrades as a run reward. I was thinking about offering bioware as run rewards either way."

Even though she did not show it, Pakhet was impressed by this offer. She knew how much proper bioware was worth – even though she also knew that normally the hospitals offering it had a rather impressive profit margin. Still, it was a generous offer. "Sure. That sounds... Very good." She hesitated. "Thank you.."

"Well, we need to see, whether Slap can find what I am looking for – and whether everything then goes according to plan."

"True", Pakhet said and swore to herself, that she would kill the other if they were to mess this up.

XVI – Of grenades and ghouls

It at least could be said, that it took Slap some time to wield proper results – even though they would have to wait either way, as repairing the two vans took several days. This was partly a result of both vehicles being badly damaged and needing repair parts that could not that easily be retrieved – and partly a result of the fact that part of the work could only be done with two people and Heidenstein still had to work in his street clinic. But in the end after about two weeks both vehicles had been repaired and fitted with some extras.

In the end, this was not that bad if it was not for the realization that dawned on Pakhet once they were finished with the repairs: Out of the twelve days it had taken to repair all the vehicles and the drones she had spent only three nights at home. Of course she had reasoned with herself every evening that it just made more sense to stay at the hospital, when she was to go over to work in the garage the next day either way – but she still knew it was foolish.

Of course her kidneys were still in place and she was pretty sure that the doc would not use her trust in any way – as he was just too much of an idiotic, naïve nice guy and by now she was sure that it was not just a mask he had put on – but she was well aware that there was no way denying that they were friends. This meant after seven years of successfully avoiding to get close to any other runner she somehow had made friends with another runner. And yet she did not even feel as much regret about this as she knew she should.

The only thing she felt was fear. Fear, that she would not be able to make the right decision because of Heidenstein. Fear, that she would do something stupid because of him. After all that had been her reason to keep the distance to other runners, to keep distance from everyone but Robert, whom she had known long before she had ended up in the shadows.

But for now it was actually enjoyable to have somebody, who knew the shadows and was not as apprehensive as Robert tended to be. The doc had already ended up in the shadows, though unquestionably through a regrettable circumstances, and Pakhet did not have to be as afraid to pull him in too far – just as she tended to be with Robert.

Also, it was really nice to be – for once – not the one ranting about TV programs. Admittedly it was due to her wanting to annoy him at least a bit, that she had put on one of those unbearable emergency doctors trid series and she had been right on spot.

The doc hated these shows and their depiction of medicine. Well, either that or he just enjoyed ranting about them as much as she enjoyed ranting about action movies. But for now she did not have to be the wanting complaining about how some shots were impossible and about how nobody could survive being that close to an explosion. Instead she was listening to Heidenstein ranting “You cannot put people in surgery like that!” or “You have to clean out such a wound first!” until she would laugh. And maybe that was the part she should have been most irritated about – as she rarely used to laugh.

While she was repairing the cars Pakhet had neglected one thing: She had not looked after Michael in over two weeks. Partly because she was still angry about the second mission in two month he had charged her with going bad – partly because she just did

not like him and some part of her mind rationalized that she had made good money without him over the last few weeks. But she knew she would sooner or later pay him a visit so she finally drove over to Harburg two days after the repairs were finished. She found the shop closed and so she just went over to the apartment building he was living in. She rang the doorbell and once again waited.

"What was that about calling?", his voice asked over the intercom.

"C'mon, let me in", she growled back.

The buzzer sounded and she went inside taking the lift up to his apartment.

As it was so often she found Michael working at his computer station, apparently being actually busy this time. "Take some soykaf, if you want", Michael said and pointed at a coffeepot on the table.

"Thanks", she said and sat down on his sofa.

"You worry me, Pakhet", Michael said without looking over to her.

She looked over to him. "I do?"

"You don't call, you don't come over and that for more then two weeks", he answered.

"I already thought the idiots have taken you. Well, in a way they have, eh?"

The sound of this was somewhat unsettling. While she had somewhat expected that Michael would be at least irritated about her being absent for so long, it sounded as if he had been spying on her. "What are you talking about?"

"You've been running with those idiots several times, haven't you?", he replied. "I've heard of it."

"You did, eh?" Pakhet crossed her arms in front of her chest.

"Yes. And you've been spending an awful lot of time with the dear Doctor Heidenstein, eh? You are not starting to make friends, are you?" Some amusement could be heard in Michael's voice. He was taunting her.

Pakhet gave a long sigh. "How is that any concern to you?"

"Oh, please. I'm just concerned. You know how it is: You cannot trust anybody in the shadows", Michael said.

"The least of all you."

He chuckled. "Exactly. C'mon, Pakhet, you know I am right. Why do you hang out with that guy?"

Even though he was still not looking over to her, Pakhet shrugged. "As I said, it does not concern you." She wanted to switch the topic. "Say, who was that asshole we were saving that last time you had a mission for me."

"You know I cannot tell you", Michael replied. "Would ruin my reputation. But I gather that he will end up on your black list?"

"Better so", Pakhet muttered. A part of her would have actually really wanted to run for that Johnson again – just so she could have chance to retaliate.

Michael went silent for a time, doing something on his computer. "So, what are you here about? A job?"

She thought about it for a moment. "Well, if you have something profitable."

"Well, let me see", he muttered and once more fell silent. When he spoke the next time he was talking in what Pakhet realized to be Japanese. As he was wearing a headset it was probable that he had just gotten a phone call.

She leaned back and waited for him to address her again. It was just then that he turned around to it.

"Well, it seems you've jinxed it", he said. "I've gotten something that could interest you. Want to talk with the Johnson? I can forward the call to you."

Pakhet shrugged and got out her commlink. "Alright."

Once again Michael said something in Japanese, then she saw an incoming video call on the display of her commlink – as well as displayed in the AR. She picked up and was surprised to see the Shiawase Johnson who had paid them for bringing back the target from the last extraction mission and if she was interpreting the expression that crossed his face for just a split second right he was surprised as well.

“Ah, Miss Pakhet”, he then said with his thick Japanese accent, but of course formally and with audible respect in his voice – just how one would expect it from a Japanese Johnson. “What a pleasant surprise.”

Pakhet did not sigh, even though she felt like it. She had dealt with Japanese often enough to know at least some of the proper mannerisms. “The pleasure is mine. I was told you were looking for a runner, so what can I help you with?”

“Yes, yes, of course”, the Johnson replied. “We do have a problem right now: A group of runners was crossing the ghoul zone in Kaltenkirchen and had an unfortunate run-in with the inhabitants, which – I am afraid – they did not survive. But when they were crossing the zone they were carrying an item – a MacGuffin you might say – of great worth to us.”

“So you are looking for somebody to get the MacGuffin”, Pakhet concluded. She did not ask why the unlucky runners had crossed the ghoul zone, as she knew it was a common escape route as more often than not the corp security was unwilling to follow there.

“That is exactly what your mission would be, should you choose to accept it”, the Johnson replied.

“What are you willing to pay?”, she replied and was rather see to see the smile of the Johnson twitch a bit with amusement over her bluntness.

“Of course, the payment”, he replied. “Well, the last time we saw each other your car was in rather poor condition. What would you say about a new – and better – car.”

Pakhet considered this. To her experience one could not have enough cars, especially as her Jackrabbit – due to its uniqueness – was rather conspicuous. But there was one problem: “That does not sound too bad, but there is one fatal flaw: I won't go into the ghoul zone on my own. I am good, but I am not suicidal. And a car is hard to divide by two.”

Now there was no doubt, there was some amusement in his expression. “That is true, of course. Well, do you think that whoever you are taking along would be interested in a car?”

Pakhet thought about it for a moment – from all she knew Heidenstein did not have a normal car, meaning that he would be probably interested in it. Of course she was thinking about taking him along, as he was the only other runner she knew, she could reach and she trusted enough to just take him along. “So you are offering two cars?” This was a rather interesting form of payment.

“That would be the offer, yes”, he replied.

“Okay, deal”, Pakhet finally said.

“Very well, I know you won't disappoint us”, the Johnson replied. “And Miss Pakhet? It would be rather kind of you to bring the item to the same place as last time until 6p.m.”

So there was a time limit. But she had planned to go there immediately before somebody else was to grab that MacGuffin. After all there were some runners and from what she heard some Mafiosi living in the ghoul zone and she was also not keen on going there after dark. “Okay”, she said. “Then I'll better be on my way.”

“I look forward to hearing from you then”, the Johnson said. “I'll send you all the

additional information."

"Okay", Pakhet replied before hanging up. She put the commlink back into her pocket and looked over at Michael. "Well, it seems I have a job."

"I've heard it", Michael said with a smug smile. "And I gather you know this Johnson."

"I do. The last run with the idiots."

"White list for him?"

Pakhet shrugged. "Let's see what will be the end of this run, eh?" She stood up.

"You are going to take the good doctor along?", Michael asked, but she just growled.

"Mind your own business." She went to the door. "Well, I'll be going then."

"Don't die", Michael said dryly, just before she opened the door and went outside.

It was only minutes after noon so she had almost six hours left. That should be enough as long as they did not have to go too far into the ghoulish zone. Now she just needed to talk Heidenstein into coming along.

Once she was outside and back in her car she phoned him using a mic and her in-ear monitor to be able to keep driving while talking. Thankfully Heidenstein was rather quick picking up.

"Yes", he started just before she interrupted him.

"Tell me, what do you know about ghouls?", she asked.

"Ghouls are metahumans that are infected with strain two of the MMVV. They normally lose their mind due to the virus and are known to be cannibalistic", he replied as if he was an audio book. "They are also blind and are mildly allergic against sunlight – though they don't burn in the sunlight as some would like you to believe, they just don't like it. It is said they see through astral vision. One can get infected by getting scratched, bitten and so on."

"Great", Pakhet said with a sigh. "Well, then what do you say about getting to Kaltenkirchen into the ghoulish zone?"

"What?" His voice was understandably confused.

"I've got a run", she replied. "From our friends at Shiawase. We just need to get a MacGuffin out of the ghoulish zone. Payment would be in cars. One for you, one for me. What do you say?"

Now it was the doc, who sighed. "I say I pack some vaccine."

"Great", she replied. "Would you be so kind to pack our new team van?"

"Sure", he said. "Anything else?"

"Yep, get some of those grenades from the stash, okay?", she answered and for once was happy to actually have gotten some grenades after realizing how easy the last run would have been if she had just been able to throw a gas grenade into the van of the other runners. And because it would have been a waste to just order gas grenades, she had also gotten some frag grenades. Those had actually been meant for the case that they would encounter a toxic spirit or something the like but she was rather sure they would work against ghouls just fine.

"Okay", Heidenstein said. "Anything else?", he then repeated.

For a moment she thought about this. "Actually: Pack the drones, too." After all the drones were fixed so why not use them? They would be useful to navigate the ghoulish zone.

"That's it?", the doc asked.

"Yep, that's it", Pakhet said. "I'll be at the hospital in ten minutes."

"I'll be ready", he replied.

Thankfully he really was ready once she arrived at the hospital and had already packed

the three rotor drones – as well as two of the spy drones into the van. He was wearing his armoured jacket and had a shotgun in hand. Once she had entered the garage, where both vans were standing right now he pointed at the workbench where all four frag grenades she had been able to get.

“How many of those are you going to take along?”, he asked.

“I'm taking all”, she replied and got a grenade belt from the back of her car. “Rather take those then take risks, right?”

“You know that we will be in big trouble if HanSec is to control the car, right?”, he said somewhat amused.

“I know, but we will also in trouble if the ghouls decide to have us for lunch”, she answered.

“True”, the doc replied.

Pakhet put the belt in the back of the van and secured it to make sure that they would not go off inside. Then she pulled herself onto the driver's seat. “Well, let's go then. If those ghouls don't like sunlight, we better get there while the sun is still high. Also we are supposed to get that MacGuffin back before 6p.m.” She started the van and waited for Heidenstein to get onto the passenger's seat.

“A time limit, hmm?”, he replied. “Well, as I see it we will either have the item till then – or be eaten.”

“Exactly”, Pakhet said with a grim smile and drove out of the garage.

Even with the time limit she made sure to not drive on the roads that were known to be frequently controlled by HanSec. And she was lucky enough to not come across any police control on the twenty minutes drive over to Kaltenkirchen.

By now she had gotten the data from Shiawase: A picture of the MacGuffin which seemed to be some sort of data carrier as well as the coordinates where the other runners last had been known to be. Thankfully it was only about four hundred meters into the ghoul zone – so maybe they would be able to get there without getting unwanted attention.

“Well, there we are”, she muttered when she stopped the car in front of the fence at the border of the off-limits zone. All five poles of the fence there were warning signs to not enter the zone and there were automated towers which were supposed to fire at ghouls coming towards the fence but from the looks of it those were out of order. Well, great, for a secure zone this did not seem to be very secure – even though it meant that they would not have to deal with towers firing at them.

“So, how are we getting in?”, Heidenstein asked.

She sighed. Actually she had hoped to be able to drive in with the car as the armour of the Roadmaster should have been able to hold off the ghouls. But it seemed that if she wanted to get to a gate she would have to take a major detour and waste precious time. Also she had no permission to enter ghoul zone, so it was rather unlikely that they would be able to take that route. “I guess we get a bolt clipper out of the toolbox and make a hole in the damn fence.”

“I don't think we need something that large”, the doc replied and produced a wire cutter out of his sleeve.

“Okay”, Pakhet said and jumped out of the van.

She opened up the back doors and started the drones, in the hope that they would be able to find the bodies and maybe the MacGuffin. Sooner or later she should fit those drones with some sort of arms so that she would not need to get inside a ghoul infested area.

“What are you doing?”, Heidenstein asked. “You know that those things might get us

unwanted attention.”

“Yeah, but they are also going to be useful to keep the ghouls of our heels”, she replied and started the drones over the console. She put the feed from the cameras into her AR display though she minimized it, so that she would be able to see what was actually happening in front of her.

Heidenstein sighed. “You might be right.” He got his shotgun out of the van and started to work on the fence.

The drones quickly reached the area matching the coordinates the Johnson had sent her. It became obvious very soon that the runners did not come very far. While there were no bodies in sight this probably was because of the pack of ghouls crouching on the street with blood running over the street from underneath them. Well, this was not really appetizing but at least it meant the ghouls were fed, right?

Still, she was not keen to come head to toe with those ghouls and that was exactly why she had taken the drones along.

On command the drones started to fire in bursts and the ghouls quickly scattered and ran for the next manhole, leaving the mauled remains of some metahumans behind. It was then, that the manhole cover was lifted up and before Pakhet could be sure what had happened one of her drones was hit by something and went down.

“What the hell?”, she muttered.

“What is it?”, Heidenstein asked.

“I think a ghoul has just shot at one of my drones.” She put in a command for the drones to fire single shots at both the manhole covers in sight from time to time in hope to keep every thing that was down there from coming up.

Heidenstein looked at her, but did not say anything to this. “Well, after you.” He pointed at the hole he had made in the fence.

Pakhet sighed. “Thanks.” She grabbed the grenade belt and went for the hole to climb through it. Her Ares Predator in hand she looked around, once she was standing on the other side, waiting for Heidenstein to follow.

The doc was quick to do so, but then knelt down to close up the fence again with the help of some wire.

“What are you doing?”, Pakhet asked.

“Making sure no ghouls run loose”, he replied.

Pakhet sighed once more with some annoyance. Sure, she was all for protecting bystanders, but somehow she had a feeling that they might have to make a hasty retreat and she was not keen on having to cut open the fence again by then.

Slowly she moved forward and looked around to make sure that there were no ghouls around. There was some movement on one of the manhole covers and just to make sure she fired a shot at the cover.

Something made a sound and the movement stopped with the cover falling down again.

“Are you coming?”, she asked Heidenstein and looked around once more.

“Yes”, he replied and followed her.

Slowly and carefully they moved over to where Pakhet knew the bodies were. It seemed – right now – that the ghouls had retreated, but she was not willing to bet that it would stay at them. If they were as controlled by their hunger as people said they would not be able to resist the fresh meat for long.

Thankfully the sun was still high on the sky leaving not much shadow on the streets, but considering that the ghouls just had been sitting in the sun to feed it was clearly not stopping them. She really would hate to end up as a dessert, which made her all

the more nervous looking around again and again.

It was just when they had almost reached the bodies, that one of the manhole cover moved again.

Pakhet gave another shot at it and then sprinted towards it in the hope that her weight was enough to keep the ghouls down there.

Heidenstein was right behind her and went over to the bodies. He bent down to look at the remains, apparently searching for the MacGuffin. But just after half of a minute he turned around and Pakhet knew why, as she had heard it, too.

There were ghouls – and not only two or three, but at least seven of them coming down the street from the north.

“Oh drek”, she muttered lifting up her pistol.

Heidenstein readied his shotgun and waited for the ghouls to be in reach.

It was a lot like in one of those old zombie films that Robert enjoyed from time to time. After all the ghouls looked at lot like zombies with their pale, diseased skin and their keratonic nails, that were more reminiscent of claws.

Then she heard something and turned around just in time to see five more of those creatures coming out of a manhole further down the street west from where they were standing.

She cursed and pointed her gun at them. “I’ll take those”, she yelled at Heidenstein. She did not wait for him to answer, but rather started shooting, as those creatures were already in reach of her pistol.

The first ghoul went down with just one bullet, but when she fired a second time the ghouls scattered and started sprinting towards them.

A burst of fire from one of the drones brought down a second ghoul and her fourth shot killed another one, just before it was able to reach her.

“Oh shit”, she muttered when she threw one of the ghouls back with the help of the cyber-arm.

A loud shot sounded – and she knew it was Heidenstein. She just hoped that he was more lucky then she was.

The ghouls were fast and now that they were up close it was even harder to aim at them. Nope, she really did not want to end up like one of them, she decided and cursed again, when the manhole cover beneath her vibrated again.

The ghoul attacked again and she shot once more, right before he – well, she suspected that it had been a male metahuman before – reached her. It was a head shot which seemed to be enough to bring down one of those creatures, so they seemed to still have a central nervous system.

This left one more ghoul, which was circling her now. Well, at least its seemed to be focussed on her – the last thing she wanted was it attacking Heidenstein from behind. The cover beneath vibrated again when something tried to lift it up.

“Drek”, she muttered and fired at the ghoul, but it evaded the attack and jumped at her. She fired again – twice this time – and one of the shots hit its target, bringing the ghoul down, but this also meant that her Predator was out of ammunition.

She put it back into the holster and readied her cyber-gun, just when one ghoul ran at Heidenstein. The ghoul seemed to be hurt, but was apparently not deadly wounded.

Pakhet fired and once again missed due to the quickness of the creature. But at least her shot hindered the ghoul from directly attacking Heidenstein, who was able to pull out one of his pistols too. His shot hit the ghoul, but there were two more, that either had been somewhat able to evade the shot gun or had just come up from one of the manholes.

Pakhet shot two times, but missed, allowing the creature to run towards her and jump. She almost lost her balance. The only reason the claws did not pierce her chest was her armoured jacket which seemed to be too much for the claws to penetrate. She grabbed the ghoul's neck and shot another bullet from her palm killing the creature.

It was when the second ghoul fell down – shot by Heidenstein – that she saw what they have come from: The white device lying some meters away from the mauled bodies. Apparently it had been cast away being uneatable.

"Doc!", she yelled. "I've found it." She still did not move from the manhole cover.

"Great", he replied tensely loading up the shotgun again. "Then let's get the hell out of here."

"But when I move there will be more ghouls", she shouted, stomping onto the manhole cover in the hope to scare the ghouls away.

Heidenstein looked around. "Well, I think we will get more company either way." He aimed at the cover beneath her. "Grab that thing – I'll shoot anything that comes through here."

She looked at him. She did not like it – but there was no arguing that the shotgun was the best weapon they had against those creatures. "You grab it, and I follow as soon as you have it."

"We don't have time to argue", he replied. "Turn around."

She did and instantly saw what he meant: More ghouls and if she did not miscount it was nine of them. "Drek", she muttered.

Heidenstein still aimed at the manhole cover. "Go!"

With a deep breath she readied herself and then sprinted for the MacGuffin. She reached it within two seconds and heard the shotgun go off behind her. While she ran back for the fence she put the item into her pocket, but she could not help but notice, that the shotgun did not go off again.

She turned her head around to see and realized that the ghouls had almost reached Heidenstein, who was following her but was not nearly as fast on his feet as she was. He blindly shot back with his pistol, but the ghouls just scattered. There were too many of them either way.

"Oh fuck", she muttered and grabbed one of the grenades. "Fuck, fuck, fuck..." She pulled the lock pin and threw the grenade. "Doc! Jump!", she yelled. The grenade landed right in the middle of the ghoul pack – just as she had intended – and at least some of the ghouls seemed to have enough wits to run from it.

Heidenstein ran, too, but it was a split second before the grenade went off that she realized that he would not be quick enough.

"Jump!", she screamed again, just when the grenade went off.

Splinters were flying around shredded through some of the ghouls who had not made it. But Heidenstein went down, too, while Pakhet was unable to tell whether he was unconscious or worse.

Some of the ghouls that had been able to bring enough distance between themselves and the grenade would probably not care either way, leaving Pakhet only a few seconds to decide.

She cursed herself. This was exactly why she always had made sure to not make friends with other runners. It made things complicated. She had the MacGuffin. She had what she had come for. And she really does not want to end up as a ghoul or a ghoul's lunch. Still she fired at the ghouls with her cyber-pistol, running back to Heidenstein.

At least the ghouls who had run from the grenade were also intelligent enough to understand that she might have more of those weapons and did shy away for a bit, when she approached.

She felt relief, when she heard Heidenstein groan. At least he was not dead.

"Fucking idiot", she muttered and picked him up, as he was clearly in no condition to walk. Then she threw him over her shoulder and ran, while at least some of the ghouls had just decided to pursue her.

She did not care, she just ran for the fence now cursing Heidenstein for closing the hole up again.

"Oh damn it", she muttered upon reaching the closed hole, knowing well that the ghouls were only a few meters behind.

"Let me down", Heidenstein groaned.

Normally she would have objected, but she did not have a way to quickly open the hole again before the ghouls reached them.

She let him down and then turned towards the ghouls, just in time to stop one of them from jumping at Heidenstein. She shot the ghoul into the neck, being glad for having two cyber-pistols.

There were three more ghouls just waiting to attack. Maybe it was because of the adrenalin pulsing through her body, but when she fired again – two times – both bullets hit their target and brought it down, leaving only one ghoul, who seemed to be less interested in her.

As Heidenstein seemed to be bleeding heavily from his back he was probably smelling like a delicacy for the ghoul.

"Get away from him", she muttered and grabbed the ghoul by the shoulder, once again firing directly.

With relief she saw that Heidenstein had finished opening the hole and was climbing through again, but she had also seen more ghouls running their way.

She pulled out one other grenade and threw it down the street in the hope of scaring at least some of the ghouls away. Then she followed the doc through the hole.

While Heidenstein was once again closing up the hole – though he did so with shaky hands – she opened up the back doors of the van and gave a command to the drones to fly back. Then Heidenstein stumbled over to the van, before collapsing onto the load bed, just before the drones followed him into the van.

"Hey", she whispered and bent down to try and take care of his injuries, but just then she heard something else: Sirens. Had somebody reported the shots in the zone? Maybe HanSec was here for another reason, but she really could not afford to find out. She looked at Heidenstein, who only seemed to be half conscious, and hesitated for a moment. She would be unable to take care of him if they had a meet-up with HanSec. She had to get to safety, first. "Please don't die", she muttered, before closing the back doors and climbing to the drivers cabin to get away from here.

She knew she did not have to drive far as long as they were not yet pursued and she had to take care of Heidenstein. So she drove maybe for a mile before driving into a narrow street and parking the van.

She went to the back. "Doc? Doc?" She knelt down besides him and checked his pulse. He was still alive even though his pulse was weak. Thankfully he had had the automated med-kit attached and was apparently drugged. "Hey, doc..."

It was stupid, but she felt bad even though she knew that it had not really been her fault. If she had not thrown the grenade the ghouls would have gotten to him. She had thought he would be able to make it far enough away from the grenade to not be

effected by it.

Carefully she tried to take off his helmet and when she managed was glad to find him at least half awake. "I am sorry."

"It's okay", he muttered with a weak voice.

She thought for a moment, what she could do, as there was not much she would be able to do about the bleeding before the splinters were removed. "You said you brought vaccine, right?", she then asked.

"In the med-kit", he replied.

She grabbed his med-kit and opened it. Thankfully she quickly found the disposable syringes filled with what apparently was the vaccine. She knew Heidenstein had not been bitten or scratched but she did not want to take any chances to end up with an cannibalistic doctor. As he did not object when she started to ready the syringe she figured that he had the same thought.

"Can you take off the jacket?", she asked.

He carefully sat up and somehow managed to peel out of the bloody restraints of his jacket.

She administered the vaccine before looking into the med-kit again. She found what she was looking for: local anaesthetic patches, even one large enough to fit most of his back. It would not do much against the bleeding, but at least it should allow him to sit up.

"I am really sorry for what happened", Pakhet muttered once she had administered patch.

Heidenstein gave a sigh. "It is okay. I understand."

"I really thought you would be able to get far enough before it went off", she said.

"I know", he replied. "As I said, I understand."

Pakhet nodded, but still could not help to feel bad about it. For a moment she really had thought that she had killed him. Normally she did not make such mistakes, normally something like that did not happen to her. But normally she would also not have run back for another runner. What the hell was she doing?

"Can you sit?", she finally asked.

He tried and it was clear from his face that he was in pain doing so. "Well, I can..." But it was clear he did not exactly want to.

"Lie down", Pakhet said.

"Tell me, when we are driving up to the meeting point", he replied and she nodded, before standing up and starting the car again.

She knew that Heidenstein should get to the hospital as quickly as possible and hence she hurried to get to the garage where she was supposed to meet with the Johnson again. Still she had to use detours to avoid to run into HanSec, but she tried at least to take the shortest detour. Just before driving to the street, on which the garage was located, she halted the car and helped Heidenstein onto the passenger's seat. He was wearing his helmet and jacket again and at least the helmet covered his pale face.

She herself left off her own helmet as the Johnson had already seen her face and at least she was relatively sure that he would not try anything funny.

Like the last time the Johnson was standing there surrounded by a few guards, apparently waiting for her.

Before she jumped out of the van Pakhet took the MacGuffin out of her pocket. Carrying it very visibly she then went towards the Johnson.

"Miss Pakhet, you are already back", the Johnson said with his formal smile.

"I am." She wondered whether he would have stood here just like this until 6p.m., if

she had not arrived before. "And I have the item you asked me to bring."

"Very well", the Johnson said. "I was sure you would not disappoint and it seems that I was right." He took the data carrier and put it into a briefcase. "Well, if you look to your right" – he pointed to his left – "you'll see the promised cars."

She did. If she was right both cars were Ford Americas and both were black – a bit boring for her taste but it would be easy to change the colour later on. "Thank you."

"Shall I have the cars brought somewhere?", the Johnson offered.

Pakhet thought about this. She had to drive the Roadmaster and Heidenstein was in no condition to drive any vehicle. "That would be very nice", she replied. "If you would be so nice to bring them to this parking lot." She sent him the coordinates of a parking lot near the hospital.

"That will be done", the Johnson replied. "Well", he then continued. "It is a pleasure to conduct business with you."

"The pleasure is mine", Pakhet said with the hint of a bow and turned around to get back to the van. She needed to get Heidenstein to the hospital.

XVII – Chosen paths

They arrived at the hospital fifteen minutes later. Pakhet drove the Roadmaster into the garage once the door was opened and just took the two rotor-drones, that had survived the mission, out of the loading bed to be able to help Heidenstein to get out of there. The patch on his back was already bloody – even haemostatic did not do much good with the splinters in the flesh.

She did not carry him but had to support him, so he could walk.

"Where to?", she asked.

"The street clinic", he replied and she just nodded, helping him down the corridor and to the lift to get into the basement.

After a moment of thought she remembered where the surgery was and steered him there – as this probably was where he wanted to get to anyway he did not resist and punched a code into the numpad at the door once they got there.

She helped him out of the jacket again. "Lay down", she said trying to orientate in the surgery room. She knew what she was looking for, but normally always had had to use medkits. For a moment she had considered to take care of him in the back of the van, but he had not been dying and she had figured that the equipment inside the hospital was better.

While she was looking for the things she would need – most of all proper local anaesthetics – she had turned her back to him, but that did not stop her from hearing that he was moving around.

She sighed. "Lay down", she said once more and turned around to him.

Heidenstein had another syringe in his hands, filling it up with what she realized to be local anaesthetics he had gotten out of a small freezing compartment in a shelf.

"Oh, good", she muttered, until she realized that he was about to administer the anaesthetics to himself, cringing as it clearly was painful to move his arms with all the wounds on his back. "What are you doing?", she asked, went over to him and took the syringe out of his hand. "Lay down", she repeated once more. "Let me do this."

"Do you even know where to administer this?", he protested though not very loud.

"Yes, I do that", she replied, while adding "well mostly" in her thoughts. Most grenade wounds she had treated had been on victims that were too unconscious to care about proper anaesthetics.

"Yeah? Then tell me", he challenged her while trying to wrestle the syringe out of her hand.

Pakhet rolled her eyes. Of course she had heard the saying that medical professionals were the worst patients but so far she never had had the displeasure to deal with it herself. "Around the central nervous spots", she replied. "And I can also tell you that it is probably not doing you much good on the back, because of the nerve patters." She looked at the bottle he had pulled the anaesthetic from. "Well, at least this is probably strong enough to help a bit. Now will you lay down, please?"

"Fair enough", he replied and for a moment seemed to be surprised, but still would not let go of the syringe. "Then tell me where you would administer the injection."

She gave a low growl. "I can't tell you, before I have not seen where the worst injuries are. But if you don't let go, I'll start with your damn hand."

He looked at her for a moment and then gave a deep sigh. "Alright", he said. "Administer the injection at the sides at the height of the seventh rib and under both

shoulder blades and at the backbone right about the pelvic. You could also help me by bathing the wounds." At least he let go of the syringe.

"I will if you would just lie down!", Pakhet replied by now having some problems to keep her temper in check. "And can you tell me where I can find sterile solution to wash out the wounds? And where do you have iodine solution?"

"It is in the top right shelf", he said and nodded towards a closed shelf in the back corner of the room, before finally going over to the surgical table and lying down on it.

"Thank you", she muttered and went for the shelf and found both the things she was looking for in there. "What about a kidney dish, forceps, scalpel and stypes?", she asked while putting the bottles with the solution on the metal trolley right besides the surgical table.

"Top left for the kidney dishes and the stypes, forceps and scalpels are here", he pointed at a low shelf to his left.

Pakhet just nodded and got the things, before starting with turning on the operating light. Then she administered the anaesthetic completely ignoring what he had said before, as his right shoulder pretty much consisted of raw flesh and she had to administer the injection around it.

"Hey, that...", he started, but she interrupted him.

"Just shut up, will you?", she replied and continue to administer the anaesthetic where it was possible.

While doing her best to clean out the wounds she counted at least twenty-three splinters of different sizes in his back. Considering the severity of the wound at his shoulder she suspected that the armour in his jacket had actually shattered from the blast of the explosion. Technically armouring materials were not supposed to do so but there more worn they were the higher was the chance for something like that to happen – he had just had bad luck.

She could just hope for him that none of the splinters had plunged itself to deep into his body.

Still, first she did was she could. She disinfected the wounds using the iodine, before starting to pull the splinters out of his flesh. With some of the splinters this was easy, as they had only superficially penetrated the skin and the tissue beneath so she was able to just pull them out with the forceps without further damaging the tissue too much.

But some of the splinters were harder. She found two that had buried themselves so deep the muscle-tissue that she had to make a cut.

"What are you doing?", asked Heidenstein when she positioned the scalpel.

"Cutting out some of the deeper splinters", she replied without caring to hide her annoyance.

"You should be careful not to cut too deep", he urged her.

She gave a sigh. "I know that. And now be quiet! I don't want to accidentally cut somewhere else."

And indeed he was silent and let her work. He had already flinched a few times, though she noticed that he had tried not to. She knew that even with the anaesthetic not all of his back was as numb as it would have had to for her to work without inducing more pain. Of course all of this would have been easier if he had been completely anaesthetised, but for once she was pretty sure he would not have let her anaesthetise him and she was also not completely sure on how to measure the anaesthetic up – otherwise she long would have just tranquillized him with the

Parashield.

It took her almost an hour just to finish with his back, without even starting to stitch up the wounds, it took another half of an hour to take care of his legs and the buttocks – but at least he had either given up his protest or was just too beat to speak anymore.

“Hook-needle and suture?”, she asked once she had pulled a total of forty-eight splinters out of his body.

He turned his head. It was clear that he was once more only half conscious. “What?”

“Hook-needle and suture”, she repeated. “Where do I find those?”

“In the drawer over there.” He pointed at it.

Pakhet just gave another sigh and went over there to get the needle and the suture. While she never had worked at a hospital, she had used a surgical room once or twice and knew there were standards to where to put what tools and what medicine. Standards Heidenstein apparently did not comply to, because why would he?

But in the end she started to stitch up the wounds before putting haemostatic patches on them.

“You are mostly done”, she said to Heidenstein. “I would give you some painkillers if you don't object.”

For a moment he hesitated. “Fine”, he then replied.

Pakhet went over to the shelf from which he had gotten the anaesthetic and looked into the medicine shelf to find what she was looking for: A light morphine. While she never had had such an injury herself before she knew that it was quite painful and that everything more sparing than a morphine would not really help against the pain. And either he was too exhausted to see what she filled into a new syringe or he actually agreed with her as he did not say anything.

While she was doing that Heidenstein sat up, though he was still awfully pale. Yet he did not argue when she administered the injection.

“How are you feeling?”, Pakhet asked gently.

“How about awful”, he replied and tried to crack a smile, but did not quite manage.

“To be expected”, she replied. “Look, Doc, I really am sorry about what has happened. This is all my fault.”

He did not argue with that. “It is alright”, he said firmly. He rubbed his temples. “And I think I should lie down.”

“You should”, she agreed and gave a sigh. “If you tell me from where, I'll bring you something to wear.”

This time it actually seemed as if Heidenstein was about to protest, but when his gaze was caught by the bloody clothes on the floor he just sighed. “Get me one of the johnnys”, he said grudgingly.

So she did, before helping him to the elevator and into his flat. At least the morphine seemed to operate as Heidenstein's movement became a bit more smooth on the way up. He seemed to still be a bit unwilling to let her help him but had apparently also concluded that it was senseless to further resist. So he let her bring him into his room and muttered something like a thanks before pretty much collapsing onto the bed.

Pakhet sighed unsure what she should do next. She had not planned at staying at the hospital again, but then again it she was reluctant to leave Heidenstein alone. She knew of people who were killed by the traumatic shock of injuries like this hours after it had happened.

“Damn it”, she muttered before sitting down on the sofa and turning on the trideo. She had it sent the audio directly to her earpiece to not wake up Heidenstein, who

needed sleep and quiet to to heal up – also she was rather sure that he would protest at her staying, because he was still on edge.

The trid was airing some documentary about awakened animals in south-east Asia, but she was not even really listening.

Michael was right. It was not like her to have a friend. She had never needed a friend before – not in the shadows. There was nothing bad about being alone. It meant to be independent. She had been able to deal with bad drek before, she would be able to do so again. No matter how she thought about it, she did not like it.

Heidenstein had almost been killed because of her. But then again he would have been killed – or worse – if she had not been there. On the other hand he might not even been there if she had not taken him along. And she herself? Would she have survived without him? Maybe. That would have depended on how well her grenades had worked against the ghouls. But there was no denying it: Having him along had made many things considerably easier... And had also made her risk her life to get him out of there and together with her life she had also risked the mission, which had been unprofessional.

The truth was: If she had taken just some other muscle along as she had done in the past – just another runner Michael would have hired for her of whom she just knew the street name and nothing else... She would not have turned around, especially not knowing whether he was still alive or not. Of course the entire ordeal would have been regrettable as she had always tried to get her entire team out alive, but never at the risk of the mission. It was not what a runner was supposed to do.

And yet she was here and found herself unable to leave. It was too late, she told herself. She had made the mistake when she had come along with those idiots when Dacart had asked. She had made the mistake, when she had agreed to let Heidenstein help her with the team van or when she had asked him to show her how to repair weapons. Now she just could not leave knowing that he would keep with those idiots, who would probably get themselves and him killed if nobody stopped them. And she just did not want that.

Still, Michael was right: It was a mistake. And it was simply not her style.

“You are still here?”

Pakhet awoke when Heidenstein entered the room sometime in the morning. She was surprised herself to realize that she had fallen asleep on the sofa with the trid still running, though her ear piece had fallen out. Her neck was stiff as she apparently had just laid down somehow once she had fallen asleep.

Heidenstein was standing in the door of his room and looking at her. He was still pale but did not look as beaten as he had done the day before.

“It seems like it”, she replied once her brain had processed the question that had awoken her. “Morning.”

She remembered that she had decided to stay just to make sure he would not die during the night – though considering that she had just fallen asleep sometime in the night she would have probably failed to notice anything as long as he had not screamed. It seemed she had been more tired then she had noticed herself.

“Morning”, he answered before scuffing over to the bathroom.

Well, at least the time display told her that it was almost seven in the morning, rendering at least her fear that he would one again start working early in the morning arbitrary.

She slowly sat up and stretched her stiff neck. Why did she had to fall asleep like this?

Damn it, she had also wanted to shower the evening before.

"How are you feeling?", she asked once he came back.

"Like having slept on a porcupine?", he replied dryly. "Though I have to admit that I have felt worse before." Well, at least his sense of humour had apparently returned.

"That's good, I guess", Pakhet sighed. "Or bad. Depending on how you look at it."

"For now it's good", he replied with a faint smile.

Pakhet hesitated – she still felt bad for what had happened the day before. "Should I go and get us some breakfast?", she offered. This was all she was able to do – and at least she felt that he deserved better than the spiced soy-food the kitchen offered.

"Sure, sounds good", he replied and scuffed back to his room. But when he reached the door he paused for a moment. "Pakhet?"

"Yes?", she said half in the movement of getting up.

"Thank you", he said.

She just made a grunting noise before finally standing up. There was no need for any thanks as it was mostly her fault that this had happened. Quickly she went to the bathroom to at least wash herself. Then she threw on her jacket and went down to the garage.

It did not take her long to get some pre-made and relatively fresh sandwiches as well as some snacks. She also got herself some coffee on the way back – because an hour after getting up was really too much time to go on without coffee. Her purchases in the trunk she drove back to the hospital. When she returned to Heidenstein's make-shift apartment it was pretty much exactly half an hour after she had left.

"Doc?", she asked when she found the living room unoccupied.

"Still in my room", came the muffled answer. Well, at least he lay down as he was supposed to. She was still half expecting that he was about to start working on something sooner or later.

With the bag in hand she went over to his door. "Can I come in?"

"Sure", he replied and so she opened the door.

Pakhet had to correct herself: He was working, he only was doing it with the help of his commlink – at least it seemed this way, as he was apparently taking notes. He also had clothed himself with some sort of wider leisure suit, though she could understand that much. "I brought breakfast", she said and got one of the sandwiches out of the bag.

Heidenstein laid his commlink down and took the sandwich. "Thanks."

"I'll go make some coffee", she said and Heidenstein just nodded.

By now at least a small part of her emergency stack had found its way into Heidenstein's kitchen. Thankfully he had a normal coffee machine for soykaf which also worked for the real deal. Soon she brought two mugs of coffee back to Heidenstein's room.

The room was pretty much as barren, as the rest of the apartment. There was a bed, a nightstand, book shelves, a wardrobe, as well as a desk with a chair but nothing else. The floor was linoleum and there were no personal things like pictures or similar – not even in AR.

"You really must be feeling bad about this", he muttered when she sat his muck onto the night stand as he was still lying on his stomach.

She looked at him. "Why?"

"Normally you are not this nice – at least not without sniffy comments", he said with a grin.

Pakhet sat down on the chair and took a sip of coffee. "You are right. I still feel bad. I

almost killed you. Something like that normally does not happen to me."

"Surprise, you are human", he said. "Humans make mistakes."

With some annoyance she looked at him. "You are not helping."

He chuckled though only shortly before stopping abruptly and wincing. "Damn it", he muttered and changed his position a bit. "As I said, it is okay. I am well aware that the ghouls would've gotten me, if it hadn't been for the grenade. So you saved my life, by almost killing me." He gave a cheeky grin.

"Well, great", Pakhet muttered and took another sip of coffee. She sighed. "Well, at least you are alive."

"I am", he replied. "Which brings me to something else: You never told me you had medical training."

She looked down. "Because I don't. I just picked up enough to stitch myself and other back together after a run. You know as well as I do how expensive it normally is to get proper medical aid and how untrustworthy many street docs are. So having at least basic skills is somewhat necessary to survive the shadows." After a moment she looked up again. "Were you really planning to stitch yourself up?"

"I've done so before", he replied and seemed about to say something else, but she interrupted him.

"How?"

"Trods and automated arms", he said.

Normally she would have thought that he was kidding her but with him she was actually convinced he would do something that risky. "You are insane. You know that, right?"

"As you said: It is hard to find street docs, whom you can trust", he replied.

For a moment she was tempted to ask why he was not asking somebody else from the hospital staff, but she had a hunch why he did not: People would ask questions. So she just shrugged and let it slide.

"That is actually why I wanted to ask you something", he slowly said. "I could train you in medicine. You know, proper training."

"You mean you are going full professor-mode again?", she replied rolling her eyes.

He seemed a bit confused. "Professor mode?"

Pakhet crossed her arms and leaned back in the chair while still looking at him. "Your preferred teaching method. You start to comment like everything you're doing."

"Is that so?" Heidenstein seemed to be at least somewhat amused, but got more serious after a few seconds. "Well, what I want to see: I could use an assistant whom I can trust and I could use having somebody take care of me, if I got hurt again."

"Hmm", Pakhet just grunted. To her this was a strange offer and she could not even say why.

When she did not say anything else but rather took another large gulp of coffee Heidenstein spoke again. "So, can I take this as a yes?"

She just shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe."

XVIII – Plans

Somehow the elf just did not want to go to sleep. Maybe that was why she normally did try to avoid such encounters with elves.

“Don't these feel, well, off?”, he asked touching her left arm. As it was with elves it was hard to tell his age. He did not look any older than thirty but she knew he could as well be fifty years old. He had short, dark hair and even darker eyes and was – like elves tended to be – generally rather good looking.

She rolled her eyes though he was unable to see it as she had turned her back to him. People said elves were terrible sweet talkers – and somehow he was, too, otherwise they would not have ended up in bed – but this was just rude. “One gets used to it”, she grunted.

The elf – what was his name again? Something French... Pierre? – seemed to sense he had annoyed her. “I did not want to be insensitive.”

“Well, you were”, she muttered, while thinking: “Please, go to sleep.” If she wanted to talk with somebody she would go over to the hospital and have a chit-chat with Heidenstein. Of course she could just stand up and go but that normally entailed even more talking.

“I am sorry”, he replied. “It is just, I've rarely gotten the chance to speak with somebody, who had both arms removed. Voluntarily I assume?”

“You are not making it better”, she muttered and sat up. If he was not going to sleep, she would just go like this.

The elf gripped her wrist. “Hey, hey, I am sorry. I am sorry”, he whispered sitting up too. “I am just curious. Can you blame me?”

“I'm rather sure I can”, she replied and got ready to get up.

“Hey, please, stay for a while”, he said and laid an arm around her. “I promise, I'll shut up.” He started to kiss her neck.

Pakhet sighed still with a bit of annoyance. She had to wonder whether this guy wanted to prove something or whether he was just lonely. Maybe both. She was still tempted to just stand up and leave, but after a few moments she decided against it and turned around to kiss him. “Whatever”, she whispered. “Just shut up. For real.”

And at least he actually did what he was told. He was silent – well, at least he did not talk anymore, when she fucked him for the third time that night. Still she hoped that this would be enough to put him to sleep afterwards. While she enjoyed and needed the sex she could have done without the entire social encounter. Maybe she could be nicer, sure, maybe she could be more patient, but it seemed to be unnecessary. At least most of these men knew it would be just for a few hours so why waste any breath on unnecessary conversations with somebody they would not meet again?

Of course she could have circumvented all of this by just engaging the services of a call-boy, but for once that somehow went against her pride – not to speak of it being a waste of money. Even being the way she was – athletic and certainly not “well rounded” – it never had been hard for her to find a willing participant. On the contrary: In certain bars at certain hours it seemed to be ridiculously easy.

“Mary?”, the elf asked once they were lying next to each other again.

She rolled her eyes. Did he still want to talk? “Hmm”, she made to signal that she was listening.

“What was your last name again?”

Okay, he was lonely – and could not take a hint. And there people said elves were not lonely as they were sweet talkers and were easily the centre of attention. Well, some people were lonely even surrounded by people. “I don't have one.” She hoped that would make things clear.

It seemed that way. “Oh.”

She gave the hope that he would fall asleep up. Drek. “Look, Pierre.” Apparently she had gotten the name right as he did not say anything to it. “I'll go now. I'll have to work tomorrow, so...” She sat up.

When he did not reply she got up and collected her clothes from the floor to put them back on.

Finally, when she put back on the blouse she had worn, the elf spoke again. “So, I guess asking your number is out of the question.”

“It is”, she replied and picked up her purse. “I'm sorry.” She shot him a short smile. “This was nice. Just... Don't think too much of it.”

He tried a smile, too, and managed after a moment. “Okay.”

Pakhet went over to the door. “Well, I'll be going.” She opened the door and looked at the elf one last time. “Bye.”

Once she was outside the room with the door closed behind her she took a deep breath. She hated awkwardness and this had been very awkward. Normally she tried to avoid this situation – as normally she would just reject a guy if she had the feeling he was lonely. But the elf, Pierre, had hidden it well it enough... Or maybe she had not been attentive enough.

She had not wanted to hurt anyone, but sometimes things like this happened. Well, there was nothing to do about it and as they had only spent a few hours she was sure he would get over it.

Outside the hotel she went around the building as she had parked the Jackrabbit in the garage behind the hotel. She hated it to move through this kinds of alleyways at night without at least a bulletproof vest. Well, at least she wore trousers this day, which were more suitable for fighting. Of course she had no reason to suspect somebody tried to attack her purposefully. But there was all sort of scum in this city: Rapists, thieves, random loonies who just liked to kill, some gangs and of course just all those street kids that did not know better then pickpocketing. Surely she was rather confident that she would be able to take any normal attacker head on but she just hated to be without any proper armour.

Hence she felt actually somewhat relieved when she was back in her car without any incident. Before starting the car she took out her commlink to see whether she had missed any important calls or messages. And sure enough she found a message from Heidenstein she apparently had received not quite two hours ago.

It read: “Slap has the information. We meet tomorrow afternoon, 16:00 at the street clinic.”

This was actually faster then she had expected but even better. If they went through with it she might soon be able to get some proper upgrades to herself. Because no matter what she did, no matter how much she trained there were physical limits on how much she could improve that way.

She started the car, still keeping that thought in mind. Those limits were the reason she had gotten the cyber-arms almost eight years ago. She sighed. Some times she tried to remember how it had felt having arms of flesh and blood and then found that she could not.

The next day Pakhet drove over to the hospital a bit early. She had not been there for a few days – basically not since she had removed Heidenstein's stitches four days ago. Somehow she had the feeling that she needed some time alone.

The guards let her into the street clinic and she found Heidenstein – not much to her surprise – in his office, working apparently.

"Hey, Doc", she said and sat down on the stretcher next to his desk.

"You are early", he commented.

"Of course I am", she replied cheekily. "How is your back feeling?"

Heidenstein shrugged and turned towards her. "Better. A lot better. The back is still a bit stiff, but it doesn't really hurt anymore." He smiled.

"Good", she said. "I was worried."

"I would not have noticed", he replied.

Okay, another awkward moment. She changed topics: "Well, do you know anything about what Slap found out?"

"I know it is an Omnitech hospital. He said something about a better facility, mostly for execs. And I hope that he considered, that it is a new hospital."

"Omnitech, eh?" Pakhet raised an eyebrow and gave her theory, that it had been Omnitech that had ruined Anderson's company a plus one.

"At least he said so", Heidenstein replied and looked at her inquiringly. "Why?"

She shrugged. "Nothing." Still she was not sure whether she wanted to talk to him about his identity, but she did not really want to confront him. She was worried though that she would not be the only one realizing this, as Slap might come to the same conclusion as her. She still did not trust Slap or anyone of the others. Why would she? This was why she was worried, as she was afraid that Heidenstein was actually trusting them. "Well, let's see what Slap brings us in, then."

"Yes", he replied before going back to work.

So he was silent for a few minutes, but then he looked up again. "By the way, Pakhet..." Now it was him who hesitated. "There was something I wanted to talk with you about."

"About the entire medicine thing?", she asked as she had still not given him an answer.

"Actually: No." Another moment of hesitation. "I have thought about what you asked me about. Your, well, 'upgrades'."

She did not say anything just looked at him.

"Well, you do know that... Having all sorts of changes to your body, it changes you. Some people get sick because of that, well, psychologically. So I am worried that if you get some bioware installed, that it might... Change you."

Pakhet had heard about this before, but she never had given it too much thought. Was he going to revoke his offer? "So?", she asked.

"The thing is that, well, if you listen to what the mages say, it is especially stuff like your arms that will make you.... Less you", he further explained still clearly hesitant.

"What are you saying?", she asked, when he made another pause.

"I am saying, that it might be better... Well, if I install some bioware in you it might be better if I clone your arms, make your arms flesh again. There might even be a way for you to naturally grew them back. Though that might be a little more complicated."

Pakhet did not reply. When she had agreed to get the cyber-arms she had known it would be permanent. Of course it had been strange at first, but she had gotten used to it. The arms had made her stronger, had made her a better fighter and the cyber-guns were a nice add-on considering that it meant she was never without a weapon. All of this helped her to function on a run. And yet, once more she tried to remember

what it had felt like to have real arms and failed.

"What do you say?", Heidenstein asked after almost half a minute of silence.

"I need the arms to fight", she replied.

He shook his head. "I could make your whole body as strong as the arms. Including your flesh arms."

Pakhet hesitated. "What about the cyber-guns?"

"Well, there are ways to install them into flesh, too. Though I've heard that it feels unpleasant at least", Heidenstein said.

She was still unsure what she should answer to this. To her the cyber-arms had become a part of herself and yet a part of her was tempted to say yes. It would make her more human – but did she want that? She remembered how Robert was still cringing whenever he felt the cold touch of her hands. "Let me think about this, for a while."

"Okay. Just let me say: It would make me feel more comfortable when installing the bioware", Heidenstein said while carefully watching her.

She nodded. What else was she to do?

Some part of her felt angry with Heidenstein. What did it concern him whether she was herself, whether she was human or not? Okay, it was somewhat understandable that he as a doctor cared about whether it would harm her or not – but apart from that? And yet, it was a strange thought to think that her hands could be normal, warm again.

They heard the loud howling of a motor outside which came to a sudden stop.

"I think that is Dacart", Heidenstein said with a sigh.

Of course it had to be Dacart, because who else from the others would drive such a loud vehicle? "I'll take a look", she said honestly curious what kind of car the adept had brought. Last time she had asked he had had no vehicle on his own – because it had blown up in a certain explosion.

So she and Heidenstein, who followed her, went up the stairs and to the parking lot of the hospital, where right next to her Jackrabbit a rather big Toyota pick-up truck was parked.

Of course Dacart needed such a big car. Because anything that was subtle just would not fit him, right?

"Hey Doc! Hey Pakhet!", Dacart shouted happily and went over to them. "So, what is it you want us to do, Doc?" he did not even try to lower his voice making Pakhet rather glad that the parking lot was mostly empty.

She looked over at Heidenstein with a gaze that basically said: "Sure you want to take him along?"

Heidenstein caught her gaze and just shrugged. "What do you say, we go inside first. Eh?"

"Okay!", Dacart replied grinning.

Rather forcefully Pakhet manoeuvred Dacart through the back door of the hospital and down to the street clinic.

"Nobody else is here yet?", Dacart asked rather disappointed when Heidenstein brought him to what was probably supposed to be a conference room for the doctors, but that was now mostly empty except for the large table still standing inside it.

"You are five minutes early", Pakhet said. "Do you think the others would be that punctial?"

"Well, you are", Dacart replied.

"That's besides the point."

"Apart from that, how are you feeling, Dacart?", Heidenstein said and looked at the adept searchingly.

"Fine. Of course", Dacart replied. "No biggie, doc. That little scratch was nothing. Besides: Did you get hurt? You move funny."

That of course was true and Pakhet could see it, too, though she was somewhat used to it after having been around Heidenstein while he was still healing. Yet his movements still seemed a bit stiff at times even now.

"I am completely fine", the doc replied.

The next one to arrive was chrome-head who was on time almost on the second. Like the first time they had met he was wearing a rather formal suite fit even with a good hat. "Good afternoon", he said when one of the guards escorted him to the conference room. He looked at Pakhet and Dacart. "You two are already here. Good." But he made it sound as if he was surprised because of it.

"Apparently we are", Pakhet replied dryly.

"That leaves only two missing", Heidenstein muttered.

"Two?", Pakhet asked and raised an eyebrow. Because in her count she was only missing Kah Pak.

The doc nodded. "I also asked Murphy to come. You know, the young elf who was at Schmidt's. He is an infiltration specialist which could be useful."

Pakhet hesitated for a moment – as the elf really had seemed rather young. But then again he was apparently a shadowrunner and it was not her call to make.

"So we wait until the two of them show up?", Slap asked.

"I would say so. There is no reason to go over those things twice or thrice", Heidenstein answered.

Pakhet shrugged and for the lack of chairs sat down on the table to wait for the others arrival. Admittedly she was not entirely surprised that the young elf – Murphy – showed up before Kah Pak, who just seemed to have rather bad luck in general, so she would not be surprised to find that he had been stuck in traffic or something like this. Like Slap the young elf was escorted by one of the guards, who brought him in and then left without saying a word. The elf shot them a smile – not the same kind of grin Dacart was wearing on his face most of the time but that kind of a winning smile that made Pakhet somewhat feel uneasy. "So, here I am, Doc. What's up?"

"As I said: I want your help on a run", Heidenstein said. "But we'll wait for Kah Pak to arrive, before we talk about it."

"Okay", the elven boy replied. "Should I call you Mr. Johnson, then? Or maybe Schmidt?"

"No. Doctor Heidenstein – or 'Doc'" – he shot Pakhet a look – "is still fine."

"Okay, Doc", Murphy replied and did it as Pakhet sitting down on the table.

Weird kid.

After a moment of silence it was Dacart, who spoke: "By the way, Doc. I've got a question! You see, I've got the Krim Cannon from that one run... Problem is: It's troll sized and a bit to big for me... You are able to rebuild it, right?"

"Oh please don't do that", Pakhet muttered under her breath – because Dacart and that weapon smelled like the perfect mixture for disaster.

Heidenstein seemed to think the same way, as he hesitated for quite some while before he answered: "Well, we'll see. Maybe."

"Yay", the adept made.

It was another ten minutes before Kah Pak finally arrived. And just as Pakhet had thought, he quickly excused himself: "I am sorry, I am late. My cab got stuck in the

traffic." Because of course it did.

"So, Doc, what are we here for?", Murphy asked enthusiastically.

Heidenstein took a deep breath, before starting to explain: "Well, to make it short: The owner of this hospital is a bit short on equipment due to some problems that occurred. He asked me whether I could, well, steal some equipment he could use. Especially laboratories for bioware and cyberware. But also some other equipment. The benefit for me would be, that I could then use those laboratories, too, to create ware for you."

"That does sound like a neat deal", Dacart commented.

"Indeed. Hence I asked Slap to find out a hospital that would fit certain prerequisites. As it needed to be equipped with those laboratories – and, well, I would prefer to not steal from a hospital that is currently in use as it would mean endangering those in treatment. That said, I would leave it to Slap to explain what he has found." He nodded at Slap to gesture him that he could start.

Slap nodded back before sending a message around that had different files attached to it. "Well, I've found a hospital in Pinneberg. Headed by Universal Omnitech. It is apparently a hospital for their execs that want some upgrades. While it is mostly for cosmetic changes they do have laboratories for different ware included. They are going to open up in one week and from what I've found at least the laboratories are already in use. But their security seems still pretty low – especially at night. It seems that they try to make it look as if the entire thing is still empty. Also there are still some minor work done in the building – mostly electrical fixes and such."

"So we could go in under the cover of doing such repairs", Kah Pak asked.

"I'd think so", Slap answered. "But I don't think we can steal anything then. Too many people and by day there are two times the guards."

"I don't like it", Heidenstein said. "I wanted a hospital that is not yet used."

"There are no patients yet", Slap replied blankly. "And it is an Universal Omnitech hospital." There was clearly a "just like you asked" sounding from this sentence.

"I heard that", the doc said. "But it is in Pinneberg. Do you know what the HanSec response time is there?"

"About two to three minutes!", Dacart exclaimed like a schoolboy.

"So we just have to be careful that we don't trigger any alarms", Murphy said.

"Shouldn't be that hard, right?" He grinned.

Pakhet looked at the doc. She could understand very well, why he did not like it, as she did not quite like it either. Then again: No matter what the doc said, she knew very well that it would be hard or even impossible to find a hospital with the laboratories they needed that was not yet in use. Even when they would look for one that was not especially an Universal Omnitech hospital.

"What about going there under the disguise of being electricians to get a feeling for the situation", Kah Pak suggested. "And then we make a decision."

"Oh, that sounds nice", Murphy replied. "I still have all the stuff for playing electrician, including a SIN."

Everyone was looking at Heidenstein, who clearly still did not quite like the idea, but had also no good argument about rejecting it – because it was certainly not more dangerous than the other stuff they had already done. "Okay", he finally agreed. "Murphy, Kah Pak and I go inside as electricians. Does that work for you?" He looked at the two elves.

"It would, but..." Kah Pak hesitated. "Well, I don't have a fake SIN, not to speak of a fitting SIN."

"I could get you one, but you know that it costs", Slap said.

The shaman hesitated.

"What about I pay for the SIN?", Heidenstein said. "Kah Pak, if I pay for the SIN, would it be a fitting reward if you kept it in the end?"

Kah Pak thought about this for a few seconds. "Yes, that sounds fair."

"What about me?", Dacart asked.

Pakhet looked at him. "You would find a way to blow the hospital up. Sorry, buddy, but I just cannot see you infiltrating a hospital." Then she turned to Heidenstein. "I'll come along, too, though I don't think I can get inside with these." She showed the cyber-pistols. "There is just no good reason for an electrician to have those. But I can be your driver and security, just in case things go south."

XIX – When everything goes according to plan

The hospital was of course just fitting right into the area. Pinneberg was where the high society of Hamburg was living: Execs that did not live in any arcology. Actors. Professional Athletes. Pakhet was rather sure that even the famous Emilia Valetti was living here. And just as it was the latest style with high society the buildings were not that kind of hyper-modern exterior that made up the facades of the typical middle class family home, but rather a pre millenial architecture style that gave the buildings here – including the hospital – their look.

Of course it was no authentic style, but rather that romantic nostalgia view many people had of the past. So instead of the hyper-modern walls of concrete, steel or glass many of the buildings featured facades of wood and dressed stone.

At least they had not had any problem getting into Pinneberg. For a moment Pakhet had been nervous, when HanSec had stopped then at the district's border, but thankfully only her SIN and Murphy's had been checked, before they were let through. Thankfully the terror alert level had not yet been downgraded, which made the entire "security for handymen" actually more believable.

Now, though, she was sitting in the team van, which looked close enough to that kind of sprinter that was commonly used by handymen of all crafts, and waited for the others to return. Some security guard at the entrance to the building had noticed her some time ago and was shooting her looks from time to time, as if he was calculating on her blowing up the car she was sitting in.

She leaned against the steering wheel boredly watching the building. There was a stylistic looking glass plate right besides the entrance featuring the clinic's name as well as the logo of Universal Omnitech.

She sighed. It was almost two hours since the three of them had gone inside and that she had not heard anything so far was actually a good sign, but she slowly became less attentive as there was nothing worse then boredom to get wrong-footed.

Because she was bored she started to go through the information the clinic was casting into the AR space. Mostly information about the treatments that would be available once the facility was opened (non-employees paid a huge extra fee), but also some links to media stories covering the opening. There would be managers coming for it from the UCAS – well, they would be pretty pissed, if the group went through with their plan.

Finally Heidenstein and the others came back after almost three hours. All three of them were wearing overalls, as well as baseball caps with the name of the company they were allegedly working for, while Kah Pak was carrying a tool box. All of them had put on make-up, well, actually not all three of them, as Murphy had just morphed his face until he did not look like a teenage elf, but rather a human in his mid-twenties.

"What took you so long?", Pakhet asked when the three of them climbed inside the van.

"Nothing", Heidenstein replied. "We just tried to make it look convincing. So we checked all the relevant electronics and got quite a nice tour of the hospital."

"Minus some high security areas", Murphy added. "They were quite touchy about those."

"The laboratories belonged to them.. But we still have seen quite a bit." Heidenstein

gave a long sigh. "And I still don't like it."

"Well, I don't like staying here any longer", Pakhet said and started the car. Even though she rather would have driven herself, she activated the auto-pilot to make for a convincing security guard to the three handymen.

That evening they met again in the still chair-less conference room in the street clinic. "I don't think picking this hospital is a good idea", Heidenstein said without much introduction after everyone had arrived. "It is just too risky. Especially as we don't quite know what they are working on in the laboratories."

Slap was actually looking annoyed. "Well, sorry if I say so, Heidenstein, but I don't think you will find anything other. I don't think, your..." He hesitated. "Your 'landlord' is going to be content with the equipment from the chop-shop on the corner. And did you not suggest to try a Omnitech facility?"

"I did, but this is too risky", Heidenstein replied. He had sent all of them files showing the door plans Slap had found with all the security marked they had seen while being inside. "God damn it, not only that it is in Pinneberg, from what I've seen the guards are all wearing biomonitors, meaning that one of them fainting will probably set of an alarm."

"That doesn't matter once you get me inside. If I can get to any main console inside I can disable all alarms and can erase all the security footage. From the information I have, the security is down to only three persons at night and as long as the alarm is not triggered the automated defence won't do drek."

"But if an alarm is triggered, we'll go straight to Big Willy – if we are lucky!"

"Why don't we put it to a vote?", Kah Pak hesitantly suggested.

Heidenstein looked at him. "In this case I am the Johnson."

"Yeah, but since when does a Johnson care whether a runner team goes into a risky situation?", Dacart said. "I think we'll be fine!"

"Of course you do", Heidenstein muttered and took a deep breath. Then he looked over to Pakhet, who was once again sitting on the table. "What's your take on this?"

She sighed and took another look at the floor plans in AR. While she did not trust Slap, she knew he was right: This was as good of a chance as any. If they went for another clinic they would endanger more bystanders, hence this was a relatively good chance. At least they would not get any other chance to get equipment of that grade this easily. "I say you are both right. It is very risky and I don't like it either, but if Slap says he can disable all alarms once we are inside I say we take that risk and just see that we get the hell out of there if anything goes wrong."

Heidenstein looked at her for a while, but then finally nodded. "Okay. Fine. But only under one condition: If something goes wrong we run – for real. No fake heroism, okay?" He looked around and waited for everyone to at least mumble some agreement.

"Then what is the plan?", Kah Pak asked.

"Well, we need several escape vehicles. The van is no good, as we used it before and HanSec might notice. So I'd say we take the Jackrabbit and Dacart's new car and whatever we can get for transport", Pakhet said.

"Actually I have somebody I would ask about the transport. A rigger I know, he is from Berlin and he is pretty reliable. He also has two trolls working for him, who could be of great use", Slap remarked.

"I could break in through a window", Dacart offered. "And then let you in."

Several people looked at him doubtingly.

"What? I've broken into houses in Pinneberg before", he assured, but nobody deigned that worthy of an answer.

"I am rather sure I could just go inside", Murphy said. "I'll be the new doctor, who just started working there or something like that."

Pakhet raised an eyebrow and grunted. "They'll notice that."

But the elven boy gave a rather smug smile. "Believe me: They won't."

She looked at him – he was a bit too confident in his abilities and that got people killed. Still, she did not say anything to him. "Well, once we get inside: We might run into guards, what do we do about them?"

"Jam their signal", Slap replied. "As if the biomonitor was turned off. Then turn it off for real."

"From what I've seen, there is a garage beneath the hospital", Heidenstein said. "And there are elevators going down there." He hesitated. "It might be that the elevators can only sent down or that you have to register a SIN to call it. From what I know hospitals like that are often rather heavily secured."

Pakhet looked over at him. Even though he did not say so, she knew he meant "in Omnitech hospitals" as he would know that very well.

"Well, I can trick the system into thinking that we registered a SIN", Slap suggested. "We would need that to get into the garage, too. Parking in the garage would be handy. Bringing all that stuff outside would draw too much attention."

Pakhet nodded. "Though with security lifts one can send it down from the inside."

"I can do that", Murphy exclaimed.

"Okay", Heidenstein said. "Then Slap would only have to hack into the garage door."

Their time until the opening of the hospital was running short and Pakhet knew that this meant they would not get a second shot at this. But if they succeeded they would have fairly good equipment at the hospital, which was a somewhat comforting thought. She really wanted some bioware and she would rather have it with proper equipment than with some run-down stuff from a chop shop.

Her biggest fear was, that some of the others would mess up – especially Dacart. While he might have been good for drawing attention during that extraction mission, the last thing they needed on this run was to draw any sort of attention.

Finally, three days after Heidenstein, Kah Pak and Murphy had gone inside the hospital, their reinforcements from Berlin arrived. It was in the late afternoon that they met with the the rigger on the hospital's parking lot.

The rigger was in fact a dwarf, who had just driven up with a large truck.

"So, Slap", the dwarf exclaimed, "who of those guys is the Johnson?"

The entire group had gathered in front of the hospital, as they had been waiting for the dwarf to arrive.

Slap shortly and awkwardly shook the dwarves hand and then nodded at Heidenstein. "Hey, Goober", he said. "Doctor Heidenstein is the Johnson on this run. He is coming along on this, too."

The dwarf, who wore a very short mohawk, when over to Heidenstein and extended his hand to shake his. "Well, here I am. Name's Goober. These guys..." He pointed back to the truck.

Three trolls came climbing out of it. They were all wearing overalls and nodded over at them.

"These guys are Moorey, Clark and Anton, well at least they are for you", the dwarf said. "They'll help carry the heavy stuff."

"My name is Doctor Heidenstein", the doc replied. "Thank you for coming over here from Berlin."

"That's what I am paid for", the dwarf replied. "So, what's the plan? I was told we are here for getting some equipment from a hospital."

"I'll tell you on the way", Slap said.

"So we are going now?", Goober said apparently somewhat surprised. "It is still day."

"Yeah", Pakhet replied, "but we need to get into Pinneberg – and we cannot go all at once as it would draw too much attention."

So they drove to Pinneberg, not as a convoy, but each of the cars on their own: Slap drove with Goober to explain him their plan, Murphy was sitting at her passenger's seat in the Jackrabbit, Dacart was driving in his pick-up truck alone, while Heidenstein was taking the group van together with Kah Pak. Pakhet had been against it, but Heidenstein had been adamant that the alleged electricians van would not draw that much attention – after all they could just be doing further work.

Pakhet took a route to drive into Pinneberg from Kaltenkirchen, which would be far away from the direct route to take from the hospital.

From time to time she looked over to Murphy who was sitting besides her. He had borrowed a lab coat from Heidenstein and was wearing it above an armoured vest. He seemed to be rather content with himself.

"So...", Pakhet began, while they were driving through Kaltenkirchen. "You're sure you can do this?"

"Pretty much", Murphy replied with a smile. "I'll just say I am an intern. Or maybe one of the doctors. I've looked at some pictures."

"And you are sure they will believe you?" She looked back on the street.

"If they won't, well... I can try out somebody else", Murphy replied. "You can trust me. I've done this before."

"If you say so", Pakhet muttered. She was not quite sure whether it was right to take such a young boy along. Well, at least she thought he was young, considering how he had changed his face before she was not entirely sure whether this face was his real one – but considering that he had looked like that when she had first seen him in Schmidt's safe-house and he looked like this when he had come to the hospital four days before, she was almost certain, that this was his real face.

And something just told her, that he really was only a teenager.

They finally crossed over into Pinneberg. Of course they were once more controlled at the boarder of the district – after all was the HanSec presence here overbearing. But neither of their SINS raised any flags and with the explanation that they wanted to go shopping they were simply waved through.

As it was about two hours before their mission would start, Pakhet actually drove to a small mall and went inside together with the elf, who quickly disappeared into an electronics store. Yep, definitely a teenager. She herself went to shop for some food. After all she knew that if they succeeded this would be a long night. It would take at least three or four hours to deconstruct one laboratory.

While in the convenience store Pakhet just could not resist and bought some candy bars, just to tease the boy a bit. But either he was completely oblivious to her intentions or he just acted well, as he just smiled, thanked her and bit into one of the SoyChoc bars.

Finally – it was fifteen minutes to nine in the evening – Pakhet arrived at the parking lot in front of the clinic. She parked the Jackrabbit at the very side of the parking

space outside the view from the entry and waited.

Murphy meanwhile turned the rear-view mirror towards himself and started doing something with his face. After having seen him transforming before Pakhet knew he was once again changing his appearance, but this time he seemed to pay more attention to detail than when he disguised himself as an electrician. Apparently he was going for a very certain look and from what he had said she suspected that he was transforming into one of the doctors from the hospital.

A bit nervous she was looking around waiting for the truck and the group van to arrive. The last thing she needed was the rest of the group getting caught when crossing the border to Pinneberg.

Finally Murphy seemed to be content with his looks and turned around. He now had the appearance of a blond human in his early thirties. "Now, where are the others?", he asked.

Pakhet sighed. "I'm wondering the same thing." She took out her commlink to see whether she had missed a call or a message from either of the others, but there was nothing.

Well, it was still before nine and they wanted to start their operations just past nine in the evening. According to Slap the shift changeover would be at point nine. They were counting on the new security shift having to settle in for at least twenty minutes.

Having worked in security herself before choosing the life in the shadows Pakhet just hoped that these guards were more eager to get home than some of her colleagues back then, as some of those had stayed to chat for almost half an hour after their shift had ended.

A knocking at the passenger's door. It was Dacart.

Murphy opened the window, so they could speak. "Where're the others?", he asked.

Dacart shrugged. "I don't know. They'll come soon, I think."

Shortly Pakhet's gaze glanced over the parking lot, which was mostly empty by now. "And where is your car?" It would be so typical if he had had an accident on his way here.

"I parked it a few blocks away and walked the rest of the way", Dacart replied. "I thought that the pick-up might draw a bit too much attention."

What? Dacart had actually thought for himself? Pakhet was somewhat impressed. "Okay. Well, we should get out of here." She opened the car door and stepped outside, as she knew that sitting in the car for any longer might draw attention if somebody saw it on the cameras.

She waited for Murphy, before walking off the parking lot and slowly around the clinic in the hopes of not being too conspicuous.

Finally they heard the truck even before they saw him. The truck – followed by the van – drove up to the garage-entry at the side of the hospital where Slap jumped out. While Pakhet and the two adepts went over to them, Slap jacked himself in, just before the gate opened only a few seconds later.

"I'll go then", Murphy said.

"Okay", Heidenstein replied, while Dacart and Pakhet climbed into the van.

And off the elf went, while the two vehicles drove into the garage with the gate closing behind them.

Pakhet did not like it – but at least she knew what she was doing this for. She just hoped nobody messed up.

All of them got out of the vehicles while waiting.

"What is the elf doing?", she muttered to herself, when five minutes passed without

anything happening.

"Relax", Heidenstein replied, while looking rather tense himself.

Finally the elevator door opened and out came an elf with bright brownish hair – but when he grinned they knew it was Murphy.

"What took you so long?", Dacart asked.

The elf shrugged. "First disguise did not work. Had to try out something else. But no worries, nobody was suspicious. Who would be – of me?"

"Let me take care of something", Slap said and went forward to jack himself into the console of the elevator. Once again he sat down before going in slumping over. This time it took about fifteen seconds, before he opened his eyes. "We can now use the elevator without further problems."

"If you said so", Pakhet commented, but got into the elevator.

"What do we get first?", Slap asked.

"The bioware laboratory", Heidenstein answered tensely.

"Fifth floor", the hacker muttered, while Dacart and Kah Pak got into the elevator, too.

"Any magical defence?", Pakhet asked the shaman, but he just shook his head.

"I've not noticed any."

The elevator was driving up to the fifth floor and opened into a grand hall out. Three doors lead out of it, but Heidenstein was heading for the one right across the room without hesitation. Pakhet followed him, drawing the Parashield while doing so.

It turned out, that this had been a good idea. As soon as the automated door opened in front of them, a woman looked at them from behind a glass window. She appeared to be some sort of nurse or maybe a secretary as she did not wear any nurse uniform.

"Who are you?", she asked, but seemed more confused then suspicious.

"Good evening", Murphy quickly replied (Pakhet noticed that he already looked different again). "We were sent here to talk to Dr. Goodwin."

"I am sorry", the nurse said and started to look a bit more suspicious when she saw Kah Pak, who just looked off with his shaman clothing. "Dr. Goodwin is not working here. You should leave." She got out of the class cabin in which she had sat in front of a desk – and this was her mistake.

Pakhet yanked the pistol up and placed a dart right over the woman's collarbone, while Heidenstein ran towards her to catch her fall once she fainted.

"Poor thing", Pakhet muttered. "Hope she won't get blamed for this."

She could already see the laboratory as it had a glass wall facing towards them – this was apparently to show of the tech inside as even she could tell it was state of the art technology, even though she did not know what half of the things were for.

"We need to get around", Heidenstein said. "When we were here before, we could not get inside." He pointed towards the wooden doors (at least they looked wooden, but Pakhet suspected them to be steel) at both sides, which seemed to not lead into the laboratory but according to the floor plan into some sort of corridor which lead to different rooms – one of them a server room – as well as the laboratory.

"Let me handle this", Slap said and opened up the num pad at the door panel. Once more he jacked in.

As there was not much she could do, Pakhet took the unconscious body of the woman and carried her into her small office to place her behind her desk – so that it would look as if she had fallen asleep while working. Hopefully she would not be fired for this.

When she came back, Slap was no longer jacked, but nobody had opened the door.

"What is it?", Pakhet asked quietly.

"There is something...", Dacart muttered his ear against the door. "Something is moving but it sounds... Weird."

Pakhet sighed and gently pushed him aside to listen herself. It took her a few seconds to hear it, but she realized what the sound was: A drone rolling over the floor. "Security drone it seems." Once more she took a look at the door plan in AR, as the sound of the drone became quieter. It was definitely moving. She counted the seconds until she heard it again. "I think it is moving up and down the corridor."

"How long does it take?", Heidenstein asked.

"About forty-five seconds", she replied.

"Okay. We go in, go in one of the other rooms and then to the server room", Slap said. Pakhet looked at him. "Are you sure you can open that in time?"

"Well, I'll have to", the hacker replied grumpily.

"Okay", Heidenstein just said before Pakhet could argue with him. "Then let's try."

"I'll stay here", Pakhet replied. "Just in case any guard will get up here."

"Remember their biomonitors", Slap said.

At that she got the jammer out of the pocket of her jacket. "I'm covered."

The hacker did not say anything to this but rather waited together with the others in front of the door. Then, at a cue from Dacart, they punched a number into the pad and opened the door, while Pakhet covered behind the corner in case somebody came through the door.

After only a few seconds a message appeared on her screen and almost automatically she accepted the request for a voice connection and put the in-ear monitor back in. There was silence at first and then there was whispering.

"That are voices", Dacart said.

"Guards?" Slap's voice.

"Or doctors", Heidenstein replied.

Then there was more silence, before it was again Heidenstein who talked: "Pakhet. Can you hear me?"

"Yep", she replied.

"I think we need you here", he said. "Guards. It seems."

She sighed. "Okay. Sent Kah Pak or Dacart. Somebody needs to guard the door."

"On my way", Kah Pak replied.

"I'll leave the jammer here." Pakhet put the small device onto the desk, then went towards the door and listened for the drone.

"The number is just one-one-one-one", Slap explained.

She did not reply anything. The drone was approaching and she waited, one hand already at the num-pad. When she heard the drone turning around she punched four times the one-button, before pressing "open" and indeed the door opened up. Quickly she put her helmet back on, as she had taken it off when entering the building, hoping to not look that conspicuous this way.

With some respectful distance she followed the drone, hiding behind the corners, until she saw Heidenstein waving her into one of the rooms.

She ran over to him and entered the room. They closed the door just before the drone came back around the corner.

Heidenstein, who had put his helmet back on himself, just nodded at the other door of the small room they were standing in – it seemed to be a locker room. Pakhet could hear it, too: There were voices coming from the other door.

Well, no matter who it was, she had the right thing with her: She loosened a small gas-

grenade from her belt and showed it to Heidenstein. "NeuroStun", she quickly explained.

"What about the biomonitors?", Heidenstein asked.

Pakhet shrugged. "I don't know."

There was a moment of silence, until Heidenstein got a deck out from underneath his jacket. "Wait a moment." He did something – Pakhet was not entirely sure, what it was, as she had never owned a deck herself. But she could see that after a few seconds her commlink did loose any connection to the matrix. "Makeshift jammer", Heidenstein explained when he was done.

"Well, then let's go", she said and went up to the door. She activated the air supply she had build into her helmet and suspected Heidenstein did the same. Most of her body was covered up pretty well, so she was rather confident that the NeuroStun would not affect her – after all that was the last thing she needed, but she feared they'd needed to stay in the room for the jammer to work properly.

Holding up her fingers with each number she counted to ten and then opened the door and activated the gas grenade and kept it in her hand, as it did not explode but just let the gas stream into the room.

The man inside were clearly guards, but they just looked at them in surprise for a moment.

"What...?", one of them said and stood up, just to stumble and fall down.

The other two fainted on their chairs.

"Their biomonitors", Pakhet said into the microphone of her helmet.

"On it", Heidenstein replied – already stepping towards the guards. It only took him about a minute to disable all the biomonitors.

Then Pakhet opened the window for the gas to dissipate. She did not want to take any risks.

"All clear", she said, once Heidenstein had disabled the jamming function of his deck. Then she started to take a look at the equipment the guards were wearing. It was clear – not only from the cups of soykaf in front of them – that they had been having a break. They did not wear any weapons but Defiance EX Shockers with them. But they had ID-cards and without thinking too much about it, Pakhet took them. Maybe they would get into the other rooms more easily with them.

"What did you do?", Murphy – who came into the room first – asked.

"Knocking them out", Pakhet replied.

Once all the others had gathered in the room, she took one of the ID-cards and listened for the drone. When the drone had passed she went outside and went over to what should have been the server room to try to open it with the card, just to be greeted with a red "Access denied" which appeared over the door in AR.

"Drek", she muttered and went over to the laboratory entrance to try the card there, just when the drone came around.

Pakhet already had her hand at her Ares Predator, when the drone just passed her without engaging.

"Of course", she muttered, as she realized that the drone had probably seen the ID-card, scanned them and hence had seen her as somebody who was allowed to be here. Well, that made things easier.

She went for the laboratory door and tried the card: It did not work either. And so she went back to the others. "Good news and bad news." She showed the cards. "The drone won't engage if we carry them. But they work for neither the server room nor the laboratory."

"And there is at least one scientist here", Murphy said. "I've gone through the lockers and four of them are open. Three are the guards but I think the last one belongs to a scientist."

"If it's a scientist, he might have access to the laboratory, though", Heidenstein said.

"Let me take a look", a deep voice Pakhet did not recognize said.

She turned around only to see a dark figure standing right in the middle of the room. And something about this figure seemed off: While metahuman in appearance it had some sort of misty quality to it. A spirit? She looked at Kah Pak, who seemed to be rather tense. Probably.

The spirit just floated through the closed door. Pakhet opened the door behind it and waited for something to happen.

Again it took a while but when she saw the spirit again it was floating behind a man, who was not wearing a lab coat but neither a guard uniform. That man went towards the server door, put a number into the pad and then had his handprint scanned, before just turning around and going back to whatever he had been doing.

The door opened and Pakhet just thrust one of the ID-cards into Slap's hands before she ran over to hold the door open. Thankfully Slap quickly followed so that once more no alarm sounded – at least not audible for them.

Slap jacked in and soon sat besides the console completely limp.

For a moment Pakhet thought about going back, but then she decided it was better to take care of the hacker if somebody else was to come inside this room.

"Doc?", she whispered into her mic.

"Yes?", was the prompt reply.

"Take care of that scientist, okay?"

"You don't need to tell me", Heidenstein replied tensely. "We are already on our way."

Pakhet smiled for a short moment. "Good."

After a few minutes Slap awakened from his limp state and looked around as if to confirm that no guards were around. "We can now get into the laboratory. And the security cameras will run on loop for the next six hours."

"Good", Pakhet just muttered.

They left the server room and went for the laboratory to check whether the door would really unlock for them – and indeed it did without any problems. Slap put some code into the door panel, had his hand print scanned, just before a green message appeared in AR: "Access granted." The door opened.

"Doc? Everyone? We can get inside", Pakhet said.

And like that they were in the laboratory – marking at least the first part of their mission as complete.

Goober and his trolls took the elevator, as they had waited in their truck to make sure there would not be any fighting. And together with Heidenstein the dwarf started to disassemble the laboratory.

While Slap went back into the server room to be able to properly surveillance were all the other guards were – as well as to take control of all security measures – Pakhet, Dacart and Kah Pak helped Heidenstein by partly helping with the disassemblament and partly just carrying some smaller parts to the elevator, while the trolls did the heavy lifting.

After Slap had disabled all the alarms protecting that glass wall, they had just opened it with the help of some special tools Goober had brought with him.

All the time Pakhet just waited for something to happen – for a guard to come up or anything like that, but nothing did happen. They just spent a little less than four hours

disassembling the laboratory and bringing down the parts into Goober's truck. Then they went down two floors to get a medical laboratories – as this one had smaller parts Dacart, Pakhet and Kah Pak were of more use then they had been with the other lab.

Another two hours and they had disassembled pretty much everything from a medical laboratory and two surgery rooms with all their equipment.

Some of the smaller equipment they put into the van Heidenstein had brought for exactly that reason and when they were done both the van and the truck were rather full.

"What about the cyberware facilities?", Slap asked, when he took a look at the filled truck.

"Well, I think we neither have the time, nor the space to take them, too", Heidenstein replied. "And besides: They use nanoides."

"So?", Slap asked.

Well, it seemed rather obvious that he would have interest in Heidenstein having a complete cyberware facility. "Let's just say that I'd preferre to stay more low tech", Heidenstein replied.

Slap did not seem very happy, but he did not complain any further.

"Well, I'd say we get out of here", Murphy said with a yawn, as he had spent all the time sitting around just in case some guard showed up.

Pakhet shrugged. "Sounds good." And just like that they left.

She and Murphy went back to the Jackrabbit, while the truck and the van took to the road. They got back into the car, drove off the parking lot and fifteen minutes later out of Pinneberg. Nobody stopped them.

Pakhet looked at the time display as it was almost four in the morning. Well, she had known it would be a long night. But she could not help to be surprised: It had worked out. It just had worked out. Without even so much as a fight. "Well, who'd know", she muttered, while taking the road to Bergedorf.

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 hey 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. One 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, one 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 proof 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 then 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 loose 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 here some more time to think, though she just could not come 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 injouries. 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 month – 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 buildings 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 bend 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 month at a time. In some of the warehouses they also just rented of 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 drugs 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 insides. 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.

XXI – Zombies and a Minotaur

"Something happened?", Dacart asked rather positively when he arrived at Pakhet's garage three hours after they had returned.

Pakhet exchanged gazes with Heidenstein, knowing he was thinking the same as her: Maybe it was good that Dacart had not come along before – but maybe he would be of use now. Meanwhile she was not as sure about the dwarf he had brought. It should be noted here, that the adept had not even asked, when he called them back and had rather pointed out that he knew somebody he could bring right before he hung up. This was the reason they were meeting at the garage, as Pakhet could rather quickly get a new garage-space, while Heidenstein would have a harder time relocating the hospital.

"Yes, indeed, Dacart, something happened", she grumbled. "But first: Who is that?"

"He", the dwarf said, "no need to be so fierce, lady." He had his short arms crossed in front of his chest and certainly had put some effort into not fitting in with any dwarf-cliché. His head was fully shaved and he wore what looked like biker-clothing, but was not pierced in the ears or the nose. "They call me Silent and I'm looking for a job. So when this boy said he knew some runners who had a job I asked him to come along."

It was apparent, that Slap did not trust him any more than Pakhet did – less, actually – as he had kept his face-mask on he normally wore during a fight. "And what are you good at?", he asked.

"Shooting and getting people to talk", the dwarf replied, which sounded like "Yep, I'm an intimidation expert" what Pakhet did not quite buy.

"Sure", she muttered and looked over at Heidenstein, who had stayed silent so far.

"So, what is that job you have?", the dwarf – Silent – asked.

"We have a job, but we did not offer it to you", Pakhet said firmly and almost waited for Kah Pak or Slap to argue about this, but both stayed quiet. Well, it seemed for once that they had found some mutual agreement.

"Ey, lady, calm down a notch, alright?", the dwarf replied. "The boy here invited me."

"Which he had no authority to do", she answered sharply. "And my name most certainly is not 'Lady'." She somehow felt the urge to plant a Narcoject dart into the dwarves neck.

This was when Dacart stepped forward. "Please, Pakhet", he said. "Just give him a change... Whatever we are planning to do."

Pakhet was about to reply that he did not plan on doing anything with a dwarf, when Heidenstein laid a hand onto her shoulder. When she turned her head he nodded, which apparently was meant to say: "At least give him a chance." Fucking idiot, she thought, as she tended to not give people chances if her live depended on it.

"I still say, we don't do anything", Slap said. "Why don't the Lobatchewsky send in one of their gangs? That's what they have them for, right?"

Heidenstein had phoned his Vory-contact once they had gotten back, who had promptly offered them twenty thousand extra if they went to free the guys from that warehouse. For once Pakhet had agreed with Slap on one thing: She suspected that the Vory did not quite trust them and hence sent them in – and that she did not like.

"If an entire gang shows up, those men are most certainly dead", Heidenstein replied.

"We have a better chance to free them if we strike stealthily."

"Well, they could go in stealthy, too", Slap argued with a firm voice. "If your suspicion

is right and those things were cyber-zombies I really don't want to face them like this."

"Hey, hey", Silent interrupted them. "Can somebody please tell me what's going on?" Pakhet looked over to Heidenstein, who himself looked over at Slap, but then finally turned towards the dwarf. "Fine: At noon a meeting was interrupted by some unknown people that are suspected to be part of a gang. They shot some of the people in the meeting and took everyone away. We are rather sure that they were taken to a warehouse near the harbour and are paid to get them out."

"Okay. And what was that about cyber-zombies?", the dwarf asked.

"We suspect some of those people to be cyber-zombies", Pakhet explained condescendingly. "People who are too cybered up."

The dwarf made a disdainful sound but did not say anything.

"So we are getting those people out?", Dacart asked.

"That's the plan", Heidenstein replied and looked over to Slap, who still was not happy about it.

"Can't you at least phone and ask them whether we can get some reinforcements?"

The doc hesitated for a moment. "Well, I suppose I can." He again did not seem to like the thought of getting some reinforcements from the Vory and Pakhet was pretty sure she knew why, as it was another reason she did not like the Vory: Most probably the gang members they would send as reinforcements would be teenagers as they were considered to be cheap muscle.

"We should first try to make a plan", Pakhet said. "And then see for what we could use some extra force."

"Okay", Slap agreed somewhat grudgingly.

"Well, we know that the back door is not as secured as the other entrances to the hall", Pakhet said. "Which makes it smell like a trap."

"Exactly", the hacker replied.

"Still I think it is our best chance to get inside", Kah Pak said. "As long as there is no automated trap hidden behind it, I might know a way to sneak inside."

"Which would be?", Slap asked.

"Well, once inside the mana barrier I could summon a spirit that can cast invisibility onto us", he said.

Pakhet considered it for a short while but had to admit that it sounded at least somewhat like a plan. While the backdoor could well be a trap, she was rather sure that all the doors were guarded on the inside if this warehouse was of any importance. "We can try it", she said.

"Then do me a favour and go in first", Slap muttered, which she ignored.

"If we can go in invisible we can then look for the men like this."

"That doesn't sound too bad", Heidenstein said. "So, what do we need?"

"Big muscle", Pakhet replied. "A troll or something like that. For whatever those giants were. Maybe two trolls. But nothing else."

At that Heidenstein nodded and got out his commlink before leaving the garage to make his phone call.

While he was gone Silent looked around. "Now, I told you who I was, now you could tell me who y'all are."

When neither Pakhet, nor Slap made a move to introduce themselves it was Kah Pak, who went first. The elf, who had once again been mostly silent throughout the entire discussion, stepped forward. "My name is Kah Pak. I am a shaman and hence am mostly doing astral surveillance and things like that."

"A mage, eh?", Silent replied. "Too weak to do anything without magic, eh?"

What a charming personality, Pakhet thought to herself, which was exactly when the dwarf turned to her. "And you are, lady?"

"That really does not concern you", she replied. "But as you might've noticed I am generally called Pakhet – fucking try to remember that, okay?" The truth was that the dwarf remembered her of a certain person she once had known and killed and she was not sure whether she could restrain herself from doing that to him, too. "And I shoot things."

"Ah", the dwarf just made and looked over at Slap. "And you, chrome-head? To afraid to show your face?"

"I just like to keep my identity to myself", the hacker replied. "I'm what is generally called a hacker and on the streets they call me Slap."

"Okay", the dwarf said. "Well, this boy" – he pointed at Dacart – "I know. What is with the guy out there?"

"He can tell you that himself", Pakhet just said, her voice once again rather sharp.

At least that seemed to shut the dwarf up until Heidenstein came back into the garage, his commlink in hand.

"Well, I got him to sent somebody else. Another runner", he said. "He said: Something like a troll and that we'll know him when we see him."

"Mysterious, eh?", Pakhet replied but was at least somewhat glad that it was another runner instead of some gang-kid.

Heidenstein shrugged. "He said we should meet that guy at eight at the old pier ten. His name is Crash."

Pakhet looked at the time display: It was just past seven. "Well, then we should get packed."

It was dawn when they arrived at the harbour, but right before eight in the evening. Once again they had come with two cars: The team van and Dacart's pick-up. Even though none of them said anything Pakhet was rather sure that they agreed on being glad that Dacart had taken Silent with him – even though none of them was sure why they even took the dwarf with them.

At least Pakhet understood what Heidenstein's contact had meant by saying that they would know who they were looking for once they saw him.

They had parked the cars at one of the actual parking lots that belonged to a shipyard and walked to the pier from there: A massive figure was standing there, taller even than a troll and even more buff than any troll she had ever seen before.

Something about the figure seemed off – though it was hard to tell as the sun was right behind him. But the form of his head just seemed weird.

"Hey!", Pakhet yelled while they were approaching. "Are you Crash?"

The figure turned to face them. "Yes", he said with a very deep voice. "That's me. Who are you? The ones I should meet?"

"Yep, that is us", Heidenstein replied.

They came nearer and noticed something else: A bad smell that seemed to be coming from the runner named Crash.

Then, they had almost reached him, Pakhet realized what he was: His face had some features of a bull, though the face was a bit flatter than it would have been with such an animal, and his body was covered with fur. "Holy crap", she muttered flatly. That guy was an actual Minotaur!

"What's up with him?", Dacart asked her whispering. Pakhet had noticed he was

wearing a katana on his back this time.

The Minotaur looked at him. "Something wrong?"

"Well, you are... No troll", muttered Dacart.

"Obviously", Crash chuffed at him. His speech sounded at times a bit off, maybe because his mouth was a bit different from other meta-humans. "I was told we are going to bust some guys out. So where are we going?"

"A warehouse", Heidenstein replied. "Follow us."

"Okay", the Minotaur replied. Nobody even asked about what he was there for – not only because they had asked for muscle, but also as it was just too apparent. Still, Pakhet noticed that he was wearing a couple of spears on his back and no pistol or something like that. So that was his weapon of choice.

Slowly and carefully they moved through the shadows between the warehouses standing here. The last thing they could need was somebody alarming HanSec because that somebody had seen a suspicious group sneaking around. And they would draw quite some attention with the Minotaur around.

Yet they arrived at the back of the warehouse they were looking for. The entire property was surrounded by an wire mesh fence about two meters high. But as it was apparently not under live Heidenstein just cut a hole into it just like he had done in Kaltenkirchen.

They all moved through – well, all, except Crash, who just looked at the hole. "Funny", he said.

"Sorry", Heidenstein replied quietly. "No offence intended." After a moment of hesitation he just cut the entire fence apart right in the middle between two poles.

The back door was secured with a door-pad, so that Slap went to work right when they reached the door, while Kah Pak sat down.

Pakhet remembered that he wanted to call a spirit that turned them invisible so she did not say anything.

"Hey, Pakhet", Dacart whispered and came nearer. "Sure we should take him inside?" He pointed at Crash.

"Yeah, why?", she replied.

"Because... He is bulky."

"What difference does it make, when we are invisible?", she replied.

"Well, I don't know..." Dacart was looking at him, but Pakhet just rolled her eyes and gazed over to Kah Pak.

In front of the shaman a misty figure had appeared and even though they did not communicate in any audible way Pakhet was rather sure they were talking to each other. Then the door opened and Slap turned around to them.

"Well, the door is open", he said and his voice made it clear that he was not eager to go inside.

"Okay", Kah Pak said and paused for a moment. "Well, I can take three people with me as the spirit had told me that he can turn only four people invisible."

"We need to sneak, right?", Dacart asked. "Then take me. That's one of the things I'm good at."

"We'll probably need to go into close combat", Kah Pak interposed.

"That's why I brought my katana!", the adept replied.

The shaman did not seem to be sure about this, but finally nodded. "Okay, fine. And I'll take Pakhet."

She shrugged and then gave a short nod. "Okay." In all honesty she was rather glad to be able to go along as that way she had at least some sort of control over the

situation.

Kah Pak seemed to consider whom he could take along. "Silent", he finally said. "You come along, too."

"Alright!", the dwarf said, while Pakhet just looked at the shaman in disbelief.

Why would he take him along? Was it not apparent that the dwarf was even more of an idiot than even Dacart? But she did not say anything – maybe the dwarf would just get himself killed once they were inside.

"Well, then let's go", Kah Pak said. He did once again look at the spirit and next thing she knew Pakhet could not see him, Dacart or Silent anymore, even though she could still see her own body – but somehow she knew even she was invisible.

"We need to stay together", she heard Kah Pak's voice.

"Okay", she replied. "I'll go in first." And as nobody objected she moved towards the door and opened it.

Nothing happened. The door just opened, but there was no gunfire. So no trap? Maybe.

She looked around in the inside of the warehouse: She was standing in front of a wall made up of containers. There was a rather bad smell in the air – a stink different from the Minotaur's bad smell. It was somewhat familiar, but she hoped it was not what she thought. Still she activated the air support inside her helmet to not have to smell it anymore.

There was a corridor about one meter wide between the wall and the containers leading down to the far end of the warehouse, where she could make out the same kind of office container she as they had found in the warehouse from where she and the doc had saved those girls.

But this container had a large window through which she was able to see two human figures – one of them had his back turned toward the window – and one of those large monstrosities.

"Inside?", Kah Pak's voice asked right beside her.

Pakhet hesitated. She had the Parashield in hand and was rather sure that she would be able to take care of the two humans with it. But something told her that the monstrosity would not be knocked out by Narcoject. But then again: If it was a cyber-zombie there was a good chance it would not understand what was going on and with the right calibre it might be possible to knock one of those things out.

"One of those guys is a mage", Kah Pak added when she was silent.

"Okay", she finally agreed. "Let's try."

In all honesty one of the reasons she agreed was that she was not keen to have that thing in her back if somehow their invisibility failed them.

So they sneaked up to the door of that container, where Pakhet waited. "Is everybody here?", she asked very, very quietly.

There were whispers of agreement and she held the Parashield closer and counted to three, before opening the door and pulling the trigger while running inside. She hit the first guy, who was still in the motion of turning around, right in the neck, and with the second shot managed to put another dart into the hand of the other normal human, just when he reached for his gun. That guy still managed to draw his weapon but then fell down unconscious.

Well, at least that was taken care of without much noise – but now there was the weird monstrosity that once had apparently been a troll. From what she could see she was rather sure Heidenstein was right: This was a cyber-zombie as the former metahuman had parts of his head and his arms exchanged with cyberware – and that

was only the parts she could see. It's cyber-eyes seemed to glow from the inside while it looked for the threat.

She put the Parashield away but that was the moment when Dacart appeared out of no where and rammed his Katana into the zombie. Well, at least that was what he had apparently planned, but the sword just got stuck in the torso of the zombie.

"Oh shit", Dacart muttered and ducked down when one of the cyber-arms was striking at him.

"Down!", a voice suddenly sounded – Silent's voice – and before Pakhet could do anything, before she could say anything a shot sounded and Silent became visible holding his shotgun in the hand.

"What kind of an idiot are you?", Pakhet hissed and let go of the Parashield to get the rifle she had carried on her back all the time. It was filled with armour-piercing ammunition – which should be worth something, right?

She was well aware that a rifle – a sniper's rifle at that – was no weapon to be used in a container that was only five times five meters large, but it was not like she had a choice as she was sure that the pistols would not do anything.

And while the shot gun did not do much of a hint, Kah Pak, who now was visible, too, did something and electricity fizzleled around the troll-zombie, who at least paused for a moment.

Pakhet used that moment, aimed for the head and shot.

The zombie fell down onto the floor and just a split-second later a beeping sound sounded.

"Out of here!", Kah Pak yelled understanding a moment earlier then her what was going on. He already ran for the door.

She did not object, bent down to get the Parashield and the ran out of the room, Dacart and Silent right behind her. The next moment there was an explosion and the window of the container office bursted with bits of blood, tissue and chrome flying through the opening.

"Cortex bomb", Pakhet muttered after getting back onto her feet. Yep, those things were definitely zombies.

But there was another problem: Now basically everyone in this warehouse knew they were here. Great.

She looked around and saw two man, normal man from the looks of it, appearing from behind the containers in the next corridor just between the container row near the wall and the next row. But that was not their only problem, she realized.

There was that weird feeling again and without thinking about it, Pakhet let herself fall down and rolled aside. A good decision considering a huge bumb appeared in the container she had stood next at.

So those things were not only cybered up for good, but they were also going with the Rutheneum Polymer look? Well, great!

She jumped back onto her legs and tried to see that thing. She knew what to look for with Rutheneum coating, but having cyber-eyes made that much more harder.

She kept moving and listened for anything that suggested that the zombie was coming near again. Those things could not be completely noiseless, right? She corrected herself on this once she realized that Crash was standing right with the others and even though he had hooves she had not heard him coming near.

Something told her to jump backwards, which she again did with any further thought about it.

Meanwhile Crash seemed to have problems on his own: He was trying to use the

spears he had brought along – but those were apparently not build for somebody with his strength as Pakhet saw two of them breaking, while Dacart was sarcastically clapping his hands at this display. The others were firing down the corridor.

But she could not pay too much attention to the others, as there was still something mostly invisible after her. She readied her rifle and waited. She had a plan – though she was not sure whether it would work. If it did not, it would kill her.

She waited, rifle in hand, and waited until that creature came near again. The problem was that for that she had to do something she normally hated to do: Relying on her intuition. Her heart was bumping in her mouth, when that creepy feeling was there again.

Once again she ducked down and fired upwards just in the hope that the rifle would do enough damage. And she was lucky: The troll-zombie became visible, leading her to put another bullet into its head.

Like the other one this zombie fell just over and the beeping sound started again.

At this Crash ran over to the lifeless body, grapped it, ran back and threw it down the corridor. The bang of an explosion sounded across the hall.

So that was taken care of, Pakhet thought grim satisfaction, when somebody jumped out a door firing at her. It was an elf, from all she was able to see, and considering how pale he was he was not used to fighting.

But before Pakhet was able to grab the Parashield again, Dacart had drawn his pistol and fired right in the guy's head.

"Yeah!", he exclaimed, when the guy fell down.

Pakhet looked at him with some level of annoyance. "You know that dead people won't talk, right?"

"So? We already have two hostages!", Dacart replied.

This could have been the start of an argument, if it had not been for the automated gunfire they heard.

Pakhet realized that it came from behind her, but had been directed mostly at Crash, who somehow had managed to evade the bullets. She turned around – just to see nothing. Another zombie? Well, great. Just great.

"Pakhet, get away from there!", Kah Pak shouted, as he was doing something, that was probably magic, she did not even ask and ran for it.

Once again small electric bolts frizzled around a huge figure, that slowly became visible. It most certainly was another cyber-zombie. She started to reload again, while the others focused their fire at the creature, which was at least slowed down by their efforts. Then there was more electricity in the air, before two of Dacart's bullets hit somewhere, where the creature bled. It fell over and the beeping sounded again.

It was Crash, who ran forward and once more grabbed the creature and threw it down the next corridor, where the cortex bomb exploded. And after this last loud bang, there was silence – at least for a few seconds.

Then: "Is anyone there?", a voice sounded from behind the door the elf had jumped out of.

Pakhet turned around and went inside – the door was still open. Inside she found an unconscious Asian girl, maybe around twenty years old, as well as five men, two of them unconscious or dead and heavily bleeding and all of them were bound with handcuffs.

"Doc?!", she shouted.

It only took him five seconds to be there and without asking any questions, without saying anything he got to work.

"Where is the other one?", Slap asked one of the guys. "There were six of you, weren't there?"

"They took Taras in another room", one of the man said with a light Russian accent. He was black haired and pale, but Pakhet recognized him to be the negotiation leader from the video. "I think he was dead."

Pakhet looked at Heidenstein, who was still doing is best to stabilize one of the unconscious men. For a moment she considered to take care of the other men but then decided to leave it to him. Instead she went out of the container-room and to the container next to it. This door was still shot and in apprehension of another enemy behind it, she once again had her Parashield in hand. She opened the door.

Behind it she did not find any more adversaries, but rather a rather gross sight. The inside of this container seemed to have been furnished to be a make-shift surgery but from what it looked like not to actually patch people back together: A men lay on the surgical table, obviously dead. His entire torso had been cut open and many of the organs had been removed, though they still lay open in plastic bags. Apparently the surgeon had been interrupted by the sudden fighting and had probably fled the scene.

Something told Pakhet, that this meant her initial thought about the stank in the warehouse had been right: It was the smell of death. The smell of decay.

When she got out of the room she realized that she was not the only one, with that thought: Kah Pak was heading for one of the closed containers.

Slap looked at her. "The last guy?", he asked as if he knew what she had found.

"Dead", she just replied and looked over to Kah Pak, who opened the container – not much to her surprise they found bodyparts inside, stored in open boxes. The sight was sickening, but her self-control was good enough to not vomit. The same seemed to be true for the others. "We need to call HanSec", she said.

"Why?", Slap replied.

She would have given him a stern look, but as she was unwilling to open the visor of her helmet or remove it she had to settle with turning her head towards him.

"Because this is a crime-scene"

"So?" The hacker looked back at her – which did equally little as he still wore his mask.

"So HanSec need to get here to look for missing persons", Silent suddenly interjected.

"I say we just throw them into the harbour", Dacart said. "There is barely anything left."

Slap nodded. "For once I agree with him."

But Pakeht shook her head. "I'll call HanSec, whether you like it or not." She could feel the glares from the others, but did not move. It was clear that they did not agree, that they did not like it, but it seemed that nobody wanted to actually challenge her.

"What about those guys that are still alive?", Dacart asked. "One of them is a mage right? We could sell her as a slave."

That type of idea could only come from somebody like Dacart. "Nope", Pakhet said and hesitated. On one hand she knew that the Vory would want the surviving adversaries for questioning and her pity was not too great considering what had apparently happened here, on the other hand she also knew that the questioning would probably mean torture and death and some of them seemed to be rather young. But she also knew that the others would certainly not be willing to leave the survivors to HanSec, that it would also mean risking the wrath of Victor and Vassili.

"The Vory will probably want them", she finally said tensely.

About ten minutes passed until Heidenstein was done with his work.

"How are they?", Pakhet asked when Crash carried out the first of the unconscious men.

"They'll live if they get further medical aid", he replied and looked over to the open container. "What's in there?"

"I doubt you want to see it", she said. "Do me a favour, will you? I'll call HanSec and I'll wait at the harbour for them to arrive. Can you pick me up later?"

"Sure", Heidenstein said.

She nodded her thanks, before moving to leave the warehouse. She just wanted to get out of there.

XXII – Normality

“No Heidenstein around this time?”, Robert asked, when she came into his office.

Pakhet shook her head and sat down, even though he had not offered her a seat. “No, not this time. No car to repair, either.” It was just before six in the afternoon – the time around which Robert normally closed down the garage.

“Then what do I owe the honour of your visit?” Robert eyed at her an eyebrow raised and the arms crossed in front of his chest.

Pakhet knew exactly what he was aiming at. Normally they met at least once a week to watch movies, play video games or just “hang out” – eating pizza most of the time. Now it had once again been almost two weeks in which they had not met and it was not the first time in quite a while.

It was hard to tell the reason for this. Of course, one reason was that she had spent way too much time at the hospital and on those days she was not there enjoyed some time alone. But there was something else, she could not quite point out. It was mostly, that she knew that Robert often grabbed things better than she did herself – and there were things she just did not want to talk about in the moment.

“I’m sorry”, she said with a sigh. “I’ve been... Pretty busy, lately.”

Robert looked at her as if he was not sure whether he should be angry or not. “Busy, eh?”

“Yep, busy”, she replied. “For once there is some work again and... Well, I also spent a lot of time repairing cars and drones...”

“At the hospital?”, Robert asked.

Yes, this had pretty much been what she had been afraid of. “Yes, at the hospital”, she said, because most of the times he knew when she lied.

But Robert did not say anything to it but rather nodded and gave sigh herself. Then he smiled at her faintly. “Then what is going to be the amendments for leaving your best friend hanging?”

“Pizza at one of the better pizza places in town? One of the expensive ones? *Real* Pizza?”, she suggested just as she had already planned. “I actually have reserved us a table for eight in the evening.”

Robert acted as if it was a tough decision, but then he smiled. “Well, I guess that will do. For now.”

Pakhet smiled back. “Then I’ll wait here for you?”

"If you want to." He nodded.

And so she waited for the last ten minutes, until he was done with whatever he and the few employees had been working on. In a way it was somewhat comforting that Robert still managed to keep this garage afloat even though the Megacorp had better equipment and better prices – yet this small company now existed for almost sixty years.

Pakhet remembered how her parents once had looked down on Robert's family, but she had always admired the small business. After all the people who went to Robert's garage knew who had repaired their car or whatever vehicle they brought – who remembered any exec from a mega corp, if said exec had not been the centre of a scandal at some point in his career? Even if this small garage made no difference in the big picture – it made at least a difference for some people, and be it only a few.

"If we are going to a fancy restaurant, I'm going to go home first, shower and change", Robert said once his employees had left.

She gave him a poised smile. "That's why I've made the reservation at eight o'clock."

"Clever girl", he said with a smile. "Well, I take it that you'll come along."

"That was my plan", she replied. "We can take the Jackrabbit later on."

"The bulletproof car, eh?" Robert chuckled and waited for her to get out of his office, so that he would be able to lock it.

"Indeed."

As he had come to work with his own motorcycle, Pakhet followed him in the Jackrabbit and waited in the one room of his apartment, while he took a shower. At times she wondered why Robert never got himself a bigger apartment – but then again she could see there was no reason for it, as he was not in any relationship.

"Did anything significant happen during those last two weeks?", Robert asked while he came in the room only wearing shorts. He went to his wardrobe and started getting several things out of it, pondering what he should wear.

Pakhet shrugged. "The usual. The idiots I am kinda stuck with are just that: Idiots. Also... Did I already tell you of the new car?"

He turned around. "New car?"

"Yep, Ford America. I'll probably bring it over once I've the money for some upgrades", she said.

Meanwhile Robert finally had decided for a pullover. Once he had put it on he turned around to her. "Sure about that?"

"Yes", she replied. "Why?"

"Well, now that your dear doc has the tools...", Robert muttered before choosing a pair of trousers.

Pakhet could not help but to give a deep sigh. "Don't tell me you are jealous."

"Well" – he struggled to get into his pants – "you know, maybe I am. Maybe I am too used to being the only one you hang out with. It's just... Joanne. You know what I think of the shadows. With a street doc... I don't know. One day you might wake up with only one kidney."

A grin appeared on her face, as she had had the same thought only a few weeks ago. "Believe me, the doc... Heidenstein is not like that. He can be trusted."

"If you say so...", Robert muttered making it clear that he did not believe it. "Was it not you, who once said that trust gets you killed in the shadows?"

She did not reply anything to this, but her grin faded. Was she now to have the same discussion with Robert that she already had with Michael? Sometimes it was infuriating. She was thirty-three for heaven's sake – and she had survived in the shadows for more than seven years. Did they really think she could not take care of herself?

Robert seemed to notice that he had taken a step to far. "I am sorry", he said. "I did not want to offend you."

"It's okay", she replied with a sigh.

There was silence between them, while Robert was searching his drawer for a pair of socks. Then, when he finally had found a matching pair and put it on he once more shot her a look. "Well, I am ready. Shall we go?"

Pakhet nodded. "Okay."

There was still a certain awkwardness between them when they got into the Jackrabbit, but finally Robert changed the topic and for the entire drive to the restaurant – where they arrived about half an hour early – they were chatting about a trid that had been released recently.

Things quickly returned to normal, while Robert seemed to have realized that he better did not talk about the shadows and especially not Heidenstein, if he did not want to anger her. And so they just talked about things that were way more harmless. Movies, the Jijitsu trainer they had had during high school, economy and Robert's work, that still made for a better topic than the things Pakhet had seen in the harbour only four days earlier.

It was only after they had already finished the pizza, that Robert seemed to remember something: "By the way, Joanne. So far: Have you made a boating license?"

"No, not really", she replied and raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"You know the *Elbschule Meiers*?", he asked.

Pakhet thought about this for a few seconds. "That super fancy boating school?"

"Yep, that one", Robert replied.

Okay, intriguing. "So what about it?"

"One of their teachers is friends with my father and gave me this after he brought over his car." He got out his commlink and an icon appeared in AR. When Pakhet activated it, it turned out to be a coupon for five boating lessons fifteen percent off. "I told him that it was not for me, but that a friend of mine might be interested."

Pakhet pondered over this for a moment – for a while now she had thought about taking boating lessons and was once again cut short by the simple fact that it was unnecessary expensive. Yet this was Hamburg, this was the Venice of the north, and especially as her swimming skills were bad to say the least it would come in handy sooner or later. "Why not", she finally said. "Thank you, Robert."

"So you are going?", he asked.

"I think so", she replied. "Thanks."

He shrugged and sent her the coupon. "You are welcome."

All in all it was a nice evening she spent with Robert, even though it was also one of those evening on which she felt bad not being able to tell him about what happened. Sometimes when she had once again seen the ugliest face of the shadows she felt the urge to talk to him about it – but she could not. He did not wanted to hear it and she did not want to burden him with this side of the world. Because Robert was one of the few people, who had not only kept their sanity, but even a certain naivety in the sixth world and at times she envied him for that.

She herself could not think that positively about this world – though a part of her doubted that humans were any better before. She knew some history, as she often watched documentaries when she was bored – even if that history was often coloured in a certain way by the corp that had produced it.

Still, the sixth world had brought change and this change was not necessarily for good. But even if there had been no awakening and all of that – in a way she doubted that it would have made much difference.

Pakhet wanted to wait for the next day to phone the guy at the boating school, after all it was already after eleven in the evening. On her way home though she had a thought and even before she had properly processed it, she had dialled Heidenstein's

number.

Instead of his usual "Yes? Heidenstein here" he picked up with the words "Pakhet? Everything alright?"

"Everything is fine", Pakhet replied and could not help but to smile.

"Good", he sighed.

"I just had a question for you, Doc", she answered and then added: "And I hope I did not wake you?"

"No, of course you didn't", he replied.

Yes, of course she did not. He barely slept – using a sleep regulator so he had not to. Pakhet found it rather creepy. Sure she understood that the need to sleep at times was dangerous or simply inconvenient, but all in all it was rather nice to have six or seven hours a day in which she had not to deal with the rest of the world.

"So, what's the question?", he asked after a second of silence.

"Well, I am thinking about taking a boating class next week and wondered whether you'd like to come along?", she asked.

Heidenstein was silent for a moment. "Sure, why not?"

"Good", Pakhet replied.

"When does it start?", he asked.

"I don't know yet", she said and shrugged even though he could not see as it was a video call. "I'll call there tomorrow. I've got a coupon, you know?"

"Which boating school?"

"*Elbschule Meiers*", she said.

Once again a moment of silence. "You know that they'll check the SINS, right?"

Again she shrugged. Her fake SIN was the best money could buy, so she was not worried that somebody would find out it was fake. "I know."

"Okay... I'll probably get myself a better SIN for that", Heidenstein muttered.

"Maybe not a bad idea", she said. Then there was once more silence. "Well, I'll phone you once I've got a date. Till tomorrow."

"Good night", he replied with some humour in his voice.

She smiled. "Once I am home."

As she had anticipated it was not hard to get a class at the school. Pakhet phoned the number Robert had given her and his costumer – a Mr. Mühlheimer – picked up. She told him, that Robert had given her the coupon and that she and Robert were friends. As Robert had already told him about giving the coupon to somebody else, it was no problem. They agreed on a term two days later. Pakhet also asked him whether she could bring somebody else, which was no problem, as long as the other person paid. As she had not thought anything else she not surprised and just informed Heidenstein about it.

And so they met at the harbour, two days later. Pakhet had used the two days to catch up on her training, as she had once again let it slide during the last days.

She met with Heidenstein in front of the boating school which was next to a side arm of the harbour basin. Even though she knew he would come with another SIN then the one he had used before, she was not prepared for the data he was broadcasting when she arrived. She was not sure whether to laugh about it or not – but once again she kept everything to herself.

His SIN was on the name of Dr. Joachim Anderson. Even though he could not know, it was clear to her that this was no fake SIN, but rather his real name, confirming to her that he was Anderson – just as she had suspected for weeks now.

Still she could not help but to give a smirk when she saw it. "So, your new SIN, eh?", she asked with the grin.

"Yep", he replied. "Thought with their checks on the SINs this might be a good idea."

"Well, it is certainly not a bad idea", she replied. After all this still was completely legal. Everybody who could pay for it was allowed to take boat lessons, right? She was only a bit worried that this might get him in trouble if ever her SIN was burned and he would get associated with her by having taken this class together with her.

But then again: It was unlikely. So she brushed that concern aside.

"Well, we should get inside. The meeting with Mühlheimer is in ten minutes and it is always nice to be somewhere ahead of time", Pakhet said.

Heidenstein nodded and went ahead, while she still grinned to herself, about what she had just found out.

Mühlheimer turned out to be a rather relaxed guy in his fifties – well, according to his profile at least. He was rather nice, though firm about security in the harbour. Which probably was why he started the "class" with over an hour of going to security protocols.

"I could just look that up in the Trix", Pakhet muttered under her breath, while he went on and on about what areas were open to civil watercrafts and what to make sure of once one was leaving that areas.

And while she got rather annoyed with it, Heidenstein seemed to be rather curious about all of this, going even so far to be taking notes.

In the end all they got to do in that first lesson was to learn about security and about the theory of different watercrafts. The only reason they went into the harbour at all was for Mühlsteiner to teach them about the architecture of different crafts.

"So, I see you two tomorrow again, right?", he asked, when they were about to leave.

"Yes", Pakhet replied. "I've made appointments for the rest of the week and have already paid the money."

"Oh, very good", the teacher asked. "Though I cannot help but wonder: Have you any reason to be so hasty in taking this course?"

"No", she replied quickly. "It just so happened that I had already taken a week off so..."

"But what about you, Mr. Anderson? Don't you have to work?", the teacher asked.

"I work night shifts for the entire week", Heidenstein replied slyly. "So this isn't any problem. I'll just go to the clinic I work at after the lessons."

Mühlsteiner smiled. "Ah, it must be hard to work night shifts."

But Heidenstein just shook his head. "One gets used to it", he replied.

"Well, then I see you two tomorrow", the teacher said and let them out.

Pakhet sighed. "Well, that was a waste of time", she muttered when they were back at the parking lot of the school. "I hope tomorrow will do something... Useful." She unlocked the Jackrabbit and leaned against the car.

"So, you consider security not as useful?", Heidenstein replied.

"Not as long as I can look it up myself", she said. "That's what the matrix is for, right?" She looked over to him wondering once again, whether he really aged that much or did use some sort of mask so he would not be that easily recognized.

Well, he had to be somewhat crazy to go on runs. After all it had not been incredible hard for her to find out who he was. And while she considered herself his friend and certainly would not sell him out, he might be less lucky once Slap or one of the others found out about it.

Once again he seemed to be amused. "Well, now imagine someone like Dacart in such a lesson. Would he look it up?"

Pakhet gave a long sigh. "Of course not. But with him the boat would explode anyway."

"See?" Heidenstein chuckled.

She just gave a shrug before hesitating a moment. "So, Mr. Anderson, what do you say about us grabbing something to eat?"

"Anderson?", he asked.

"Your SIN?", she replied with a smirk. "The name."

"Ah, of course", he said with a faint smile. "Well, yes, we can get something to eat."

XXIII – Callback

Thankfully the further boating lessons were more practical – as in they actually featured boating. But all in all Pakhet found that it was not that hard as long as it was motorized vehicles, that were not so different from normal cars, when it came to steering.

In a way Heidenstein managed to annoy her, though, as with everything he was just that much more patient than she was, leaving her feeling rather impatient and irritable. Why did he have to be the biggest fucking nice guy around?

But then something that angered her even more. It was the end of the week when Heidenstein called her just before she was off to the boating school.

“Yes? What's up?”, she asked upon picking up.

“Just a short head's up”, he said with a rather weak voice. “I won't come today. I... Have to call in sick.”

This made Pakhet pause for a while. “Is everything alright?”, she asked carefully. “Shall I come over?”

“No, no, it's alright”, came the prompt reply. “I'm just... Not feeling well. You go. Have fun. We'll see each other next week, alright?”

“Alright”, she said slowly, though she did not really like this. She had a bad feeling and was yet tempted to still drive over to the hospital, to see whether he was alright – but then again he actually sounded as if he would prefer if she did not do it.

What had happened? Pakhet was relatively sure that he would not have had a problem if he was just normally sick. So either he caught himself some rather nasty infection or he had suffered some sort of injury. Did he go on a run alone? If so he was even crazier than she already knew he was. He was not bad with a gun – but he just was not good enough to beat several adversaries alone.

While without him being there she did not feel as annoyed during the boating lesson, she felt more obliged to be nice to Mühlsteiner, who of course did ask where Heidenstein – or rather “Dr. Anderson” – was.

“He called in sick”, Pakhet answered and left it with that.

Maybe the worst part of this was, that she had actually enjoyed not doing this alone, as she would have normally done it. It was actually nice to have somebody else around, to have somebody to talk to about what she had learned. Well, maybe Robert was right after all and even she could not stay alone forever.

But that was stupid. She could very well do without Heidenstein and without Robert.

She had done so many times and for many weeks. And just to proof that point, she did not call Heidenstein again and did not drive over to the hospital, but rather spent the next three days just like she used to: With training, shooting practice and the obligatory visit at Michael's, who was once more busy with some new delivery in the back room of his shop.

"Hey, Pakhet", he said when she entered the shop. "Once again really nice to see you. How long has it been?"

She sighed, jumped over the counter and came over to him. "Well, I've been busy."

"Another run?", he asked.

"Pretty much", she replied. "And some training..."

Michael looked up from his work. "Another job the good Dr. Anderson got for you?"

"Well..." She paused when she realized what he had just said. She cursed silently. She knew Michael, of course he had made his own research. It was his way to ensure having leverage in case he needed something. "Who are you talking about?"

For a few seconds Michael eyed at her. "Now are you lying or not? I am talking about dear Doc Heidenstein. His real name: Anderson."

Quietly Pakhet looked at him. "You are obnoxious, Michael."

"So you did know?", he asked.

"What if?", she replied with a shrug.

Michael gave a melodramatic sigh. "And here I was thinking you would tell me something like that. After all you are not trust somebody like him, do you?"

Pakhet felt how she was getting angrier by the second. She knew Michael just was like that and yet she got angry because he had to get involved in this. "I'd rather trust him then you, Michael. You should know that!"

"I am hurt", he replied and looked at her. The hint of a suppressed grin was visible on his face. "Don't tell me you're falling for that man."

"I am not", she replied firmly. "But from all I know I've not signed a contract to not have any friends in the shadows."

"Oh no, you didn't", Michael replied now unable to further hide his amusement. "It is just so... Not you, Miss Independent."

Pakhet once again just shrugged and looked into his eyes, knowing very well that with her cyber-eyes this was a rather creepy sigh that would intimidate quite a few people – but not Michael, he knew her too well.

"Maybe I should think about selling him out to Omnitech, hmm? What do you think?", he said. "Dear Dr. Anderson."

"Don't even think about it", Pakhet growled at him, her hand on the holster of her pistol. "If you threaten him, if you are even so much as think about selling him out, I *will* kill you."

Michael grinned. "So you have fallen for him."

"No, it's called having a friend – you should try it at times", she said very slowly and firmly.

"No thank you", he said.

She just looked at him for a few more seconds, before turning around. "I'll be going now."

"So you are not asking for a job?", he shouted after her.

"No!" With that she jumped over the counter once more and went out of the shop. She was angry, almost furious at Michael.

She got back into her car and drove off, before activating her auto-pilot to have some time to calm down.

Yes, of course she knew it was Michael's way to do things. He always wanted to know everything – or at least as much as possible – about everybody he knew, about everyone he had met even once. And with his own skills in hacking and his contacts to other hackers he was normally rather good in finding out more thing then one thought should be possible.

She still remembered how it was when she first met him. He had done quite a bit of research back then, had known about her parents, about her problems at work, about everything. Back then, she had been angry with him, too. But then she had admitted that he was right in one thing: She had not been able to continue doing what she had been doing till then.

But this was different. Heidenstein had apparently good reasons to do what he was doing – even though she could only guess what exactly it was. But she just knew he was actually a good man and because of that she would not let Michael threaten him.

It was only when she arrived at home, that her commlink started buzzing. She still had not quite cooled down. Still, there was a certain irony to it when she realized that it was Heidenstein, who was calling.

"Yes?", she asked.

"Pakhet?", Heidenstein replied.

"Yeah. What is it?", she asked with still some anger in her voice.

Apparently he chose to ignore it. "Well, I just wanted to tell you: Herr Schmidt called, you know, the Johnson from the run on which we met. He wants to call the team back together again and I wanted to ask whether you'll come, too."

Pakhet took a deep breath. The last thing she wanted right now, was to be surrounded those idiots, but there was still the other side to this: She knew he would go and judged by his voice he still seemed to be rather ailing. "When and where?", she finally asked, cursing herself while doing so.

"Today at six in the evening", he replied. "The same area as last time. I'll sent you the exact address, if you are going to come."

"I'll come", Pakhet said with a sigh. "Should I get you on the way?"

A pause on his side of the line. "No, no, I'm alright", he replied.

"Sure?", she asked doubtingly.

"Yeah, I am alright", Heidenstein assured her. "I'll see you there."

For a moment she wanted to object, but then again he was an adult and should be able to look out for himself. "Okay. See you there." She sighed. Great, another evening spent with idiots – just what she needed.

Just before six Pakhet arrived at the address Heidenstein had sent her. As it was the end of June the sun was still in the sky and the run down buildings and streets of Harburg looked somewhat better then they had those weeks ago. It felt longer then just a few weeks.

She had been controlled by HanSec on her way there – but as her fake SIN supported her having a license for pretty much every dubious item in her possession she had had no problem getting through their blockade. Still it seemed that they once again did random controls – hopefully not for too long.

She went to the house and pressed the bell button and soon the door was opened by Murphy, who grinned at her.

"So you are still on board, eh?", he said.

"Apparently", she muttered grimly and walked past him into the house.

Inside she found Dacart, Silent, Heidenstein and Schmidt, though there was no trace of Slap or Kah Pak.

Heidenstein was sitting at the table in the kitchen, which was once again somewhat

furnished. He looked rather pale and the way he sat seemed odd.

"Hey, Pakhet!", Dacart shouted happily.

"Hey, Dacart", she replied with way less enthusiasm. Once more she looked at Heidenstein, who really looked bad. What the hell had he done? "Where are the others?"

"Slap should come soon", Schmidt said. "Kah Pak said he does not know whether he can come. He had been outside the city."

"Ah", she replied.

Schmidt shot her a short smile. "It is nice to see you again, by the way. I am honest, I did not think you'd come."

"Well, here I am", she grumbled and sat down. "I hope I won't regret it." Those words were true. "I don't suppose you'll tell us, what this run is about, before the others – or at least Slap is there."

Schmidt nodded. "That's true."

It was only two minutes later that the bell rang and Slap arrived. He, too, was let in by Murphy and leaned against the wall once he had entered the kitchen.

Schmidt went in one of the other rooms to call Kah Pak, but then returned shrugging. "Kah Pak won't make it. I take it that you'll inform him about the run details, right?"

"Sure", Slap said shrugging himself.

Schmidt gave another nod, before starting to project something into AR. It was the picture of a boy in his late teens, blond, blue eyed with some freckles. "Well, let's just say, that this is all rather unfortunate. I had planned this differently. But in three weeks time, the big run will happen, whether I like it or not. You'll be the back-up team on that one."

Pakhet coughed. "And what will that big run be about?"

"Well, I'll tell you if you manage to come back from this run successful", Schmidt said and shot her a look.

Crossing her arms in front of her chest she leaned back. So they actually were not the back-up team, but this was a test. To see whether they could do it.

When she did not say anything, Schmidt continued. "Well, you'll have to manage as it is. This run I am here to hire you for today has two goals. But let me explain: In five days time you'll enter the local Urban Brawl amateur mini-league as an amateur game. As Saeder-Krupp uses those amateur games for some promotion, they'll equip the teams with some of their tech for the bigger amateur games. Which means that you

will get a tactical network for once. That is your first mission goal: Manage to smuggle the tactical network you'll receive out of the arena. I don't care how you do it – but I would prefer a subtle way.”

“What for?”, Pakhet asked.

“For your team. You'll find it useful on the next run.” Schmidt shot her another look. “The second mission goal: This boy” – he pointed at the AR picture – “will be playing for one of the other teams. Your Johnson has hired you to get him out of the arena – unharmed. His name is Johannes Kemper.”

“Is he some exec son?”, Dacart asked.

“That is classified”, Schmidt replied.

Pakhet hesitated for a moment. “How old is he?”

It seemed that Schmidt was surprised about that question. “Seventeen.”

Pakhet looked at the picture of the boy. “Sorry. Count me out, I'm not gonna do it.”

The others looked at her. “Why?”

“Because I am not going around kidnapping boys barely more than kids”, she replied and stood up. “Sorry, not gonna do it.”

“He is seventeen. Almost of-age. How does that count as a child?”, Slap exclaimed in disbelief.

Pakhet looked at him. “He is not yet of-age. Technically that counts as a child.”

Silent, who had done his name honour so far, made a despicable noise. “Oh, please. How is he a child? I mean, you would kidnap Dacart, if somebody paid for it, right?”

Dacart gave him a hurt look. “Hey!”

Pakhet shook her head. “Dacart is of-age. And he is a god-damn psychopath, who is a danger to himself and everyone around him. That is something entirely different.” She looked around. “I would not kidnap Murphy, though.”

The elf gave an amused grin. “Thanks.”

She sighed. “You are welcome.”

Schmidt looked around and seemed to think about it for about a minute, until he addressed Pakhet: “On a word in private.” He said and went to one of the doors leading out of the room, apparently waiting for her.

While she did not like this, Pakhet stood up and went over to him, following him into

the other room, where he closed the door behind her. "Okay, listen. I am not supposed to tell you. But you seem reasonable and upright enough, so I will." He made a short pause. "The one hiring you to kidnap the boy, is the boy's father. He is an exec at Evo, but he is going to leave for Wuxing. But the boy is living in an acology so getting him out is not that easy. Especially without telling him. And he is afraid to loose his son, if he stays in the arcology, once he leaves Evo."

This sounded awfully like a made-up tale to convince her to come on this run. She looked at Schmidt for a while. He looked honest – but then again he was a Johnson, he would be as good at lying as Michael was. But if what he said it was truth... Well, she somehow doubted that those slops would be able to manage entirely on their own. Drek, she cursed inside. This was harder then expected. "Okay", she finally said. "I just hope you don't lie."

"I am not", Schmidt replied with an apparently honest smile. "You can trust me."

Yeah, sure, she thought to herself. Then she turned around and opened the door. "Well, change of plans. I am coming along." She did notice the gazes both Silent and Slap shot Schmidt and could very well guess what they thought. They assumed he had offered extra money to do the job – well, at least Slap should by now know her better then that.

"Well, I am not sure, whether I could come along", Heidenstein said. "I am not in the best condition."

"I've noticed", she muttered and looked at him, still worried. "Well, but we'll need Crash. And Murphy."

"Me?", the elven boy replied surprised, before giving a smug grin. "Oh, I am honoured."

"We need somebody, who can make a good face, while smuggling that thing, the TacNet, out of the arena. And you said, you can talk people into anything. So: Time to proof it", she said calmly.

"But why do we need Crash?", Dacart asked. "He seemed to be not that... Awesome."

Pakhet fixated him. "Are you fucking kidding me? Have you seen him? He is so big and bulky, if nothing else he will be great at just running around holding the god damn ball." She sighed. "By the way: What is going to be the payment?"

"Seven thousand each for seven people", Schmidt replied. "Exactly one amateur team full of people."

Pakhet thought about this for a while. For years she and Robert had watched Urban Brawl games. She knew the rules – well, most of them at least – and how those games played out. The question remained: How were they going to get some expensive equipment – and the boy out of there.

"Also: There will be prize money of a hundred thousand, from what I've heard", Schmidt added.

"A hundred thousand?", Silent echoed.

That sounded useful. Better than just seven thousand. But how were they to win a game in the amateur league? They were fighters, but no athletes. She rather doubted that the others would do a good job with a ball – well, she herself probably would not. Then again there was another way to win an Urban Brawl game... "Wipe out", she muttered to herself. "We could win by wipe out."

"What?", Slap asked.

"Wipe out", she repeated. "It is a rule. If all players of a team are unable to play the other team wins by default. It's called the wipe out rule. What it means: We just have to knock everyone from the other teams out."

"And how do you think we can do that?", Slap asked further.

"I am going to be a Heavy and shoot the other's K.O.", she said. "Well, and I think Crash will be great with that, too." She pondered about this for a while. "About the boy: If you, Slap, hack into the system of the arena, you could have the Doc called in case of an emergency, right?"

The decker nodded. "Of course I can."

"Great. We just need to knock him out and then play it out as if he was badly hurt", she said. "And then Doc just gets him out with his ambulance. You could do that, right?" She looked at Heidenstein.

"I think so", he replied. "Though none of the vans looks like ambulances."

"We can change that", Pakhet said and he just nodded. Well, if he looked like this nobody would believe him to be a doctor. What the hell had he done? She continued with her plan: "About the TacNet: We could stage a fight between us during the last game. Murphy takes the TacNet, gets hit and then acts as if he had been knocked out. Or even better: Gets knocked out for real."

"I am not sure I like that plan", Murphy replied.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure you won't get seriously injured", she said – and when he did not reply anything, she added: "I'll buy you some ice cream."

The elf gave a sigh. "Okay", he muttered though he did not sound very confident in this plan.

After he had spoken, silent fell in the room, as nobody seemed to have anything to add.

"Well, there is no way this will work", Slap muttered. "The TacNet is not small – and it is expensive."

"That's why we give it to the boy", Pakhet said. "He has a way to influence people."

"There are still many things that could go wrong", the hacker objected.

"Any additions to the plan?", she asked.

Silence was the answer. Actually Pakhet had not planned on being so bossy – but after the things she had seen on the last run and considering that this was some sort of test, she was also not willing to leave it to somebody who considered a shot gun as a stealth weapon. Also she was still mad at Michael and yelling at the others felt like a good way to relieve some stress.

And as if he knew she thought about this, Silent got out his commlink. "I'll call Mr. Minotaur", he said and went to the door, closing it behind himself.

Thankfully Crash had given them his number. Apparently he knew that being well connected meant making good money in the shadows.

They could hear Silent talk in the other room for quite a while, but were unable to make out words. Then he finally returned, his face red. "He is not going to come."

"Why?", Slap asked.

"Said he wanted more payment", Silent muttered – with something in his voice catching Pakhet's attention.

She looked at the dwarf. "How much did you offer him?"

"Well, nothing of course", Silent said. "I am not paying a stupid Minotaur."

Yeah, who was stupid here. "Idiot!", she said, got out her own commlink and turned her back to the rest of the group. She, too, dialled Crash's number and it only took one ring for him to pick up.

"Just fucking dwarf, if I...", a deep voice growled at her.

"It's not the fucking dwarf, it's Pakhet", she interjected. "Calm down, big guy. The dwarf is an idiot and we both know it."

"You can tell him he can go fuck himself and if he tries to mess with me again, I'll personally come by and put his damn ass up a pole!", the Minotaur ranted.

"I'll tell him that", Pakhet replied. "But I am here to make you a reasonable offer."

"Not interested", Crash said.

For a moment she was afraid he would hang up, but thankfully he did not. "Wait, Crash. Listen. You'll get a fair share of seven thousand. How does that sound."

The only reply she got was: "Nope."

"And if we win the tournament you'll get your cut of the prize money", she added.

"Hey!", somebody – she was pretty sure it was Silent – protested behind her, but she did not care, as she knew very well that they needed some serious muscle to win those games. And for all intent and purposes Crash was serious muscle.

"Go on", Crash growled.

"Actually I'll give you eight thousand", she then said. "We'll cut the one thousand from Silent's payment for being an idiot."

Another protest behind her. "Hey!"

A deep chuckle that sounded rather strange was heard. "Okay. Sounds fair", the Minotaur finally agreed.

"Great. I'll text you with further information", Pakhet said with a smug grin on her face. "Thank you, big guy." Then she hung up and turned around.

It was apparent that Silent was angry. His face was burning red when he looked at her. "Who gave you the right...", he started, but once again she interjected.

"I did."

It was not long before the others finally went back home. There was nothing much to add to their plan – even though Pakhet herself knew that it still had some gaps. But without knowing more about the arena, there was only so much they could do. She still had a few more days to think about backup plans and as long as the others were unable to offer any, she did not see herself liable to come up with such plans on the fly.

But there was one thing she could not stop herself from, when most of the others had already gone: She followed Heidenstein into the garage. She wanted to talk to him in private and as she had the feeling he was avoiding her, this seemed to be the best moment to do it.

"Hey, Doc", she said, while he stood prone at his motorcycle, putting his med-kit into the compartment beneath the seat. "You are not going to tell me you came here on the motorcycle, are you?"

"Yes, I did", he replied with a sigh and turned around to her.

"And you are driving back? Like that?", she asked in disbelief. She had already seen him being a rather unreasonable patient, but considering how pale he was this was

just ridiculous.

"I am", he just said.

She looked at him for a moment. "What has happened to you. You look bad. Really bad."

"Nothing", he replied. "Let's just say I did somebody a favour and then got shot at."

"A run gone bad?", she asked, but he shook his head.

"As I said: A favour." Even though it seemed to cause him some pain, he turned the motorcycle around.

Pakhet grabbed his hand. "Let me drive you home", she offered. "You look really bad."

"I am fine", he replied stubbornly.

"No, you are not! God damn it, Heidenstein, what's wrong with you? Why won't you let me help you?" She did not shout those questions, but rather spoke quietly, emphatically. She really did not understand why he would not let her help. Yes, he was stubborn, but this was once again just ridiculous.

"Because there is nothing you can do for me", he said and somehow got onto the motorcycle. "I'll be alright, okay?", he then added, put the helmet on and drove off.

"You are a fucking idiot", Pakhet muttered and got out her commlink to call Kah Pak. If Heidenstein would not let her do anything for him, he would have to live with magic healing.

About half an hour later Pakhet arrived at the hospital. She parked the Jackrabbit in the back of the hospital and was rather relieved when the goons in the back let her in. The way Heidenstein had acted in Harburg, she had not been sure whether he had explicitly told them to keep her outside.

She looked into the garage and was glad to see his motorcycle – so he had made it home. Good, she had been worried.

For a moment she considered whether she should look for him in his flat, but then she reminded her that him resting in his apartment would mean him being reasonable and when it came to his own injuries he most certainly was not.

So she went down into the street clinic. As soon as she had reached the basement she heard what sounded like chanting. This had to mean that Kah Pak was already there.

She followed the chanting and found the door to Heidenstein's office left ajar. Apparently the chanting came out of there so Pakhet completely pushed the door

open to look inside. Just to burst out laughing.

Heidenstein was sitting right in the middle of some sort of arcane drawing that Kah Pak had drawn onto the floor with red sand. Birds' feathers and clusters of animal fur were positioned around him, while Kah Pak was walking along the outer lines of that arcane cycle chanting something in a language she did not understand.

This enough was already weird enough to be somewhat funny, but it was the expression on Heidenstein's face that got her. He clearly looked half ashamed, half annoyed and a bit uncomprehending, too. His upper body was stripped, though he was still wearing bandages on his arms and a large plaster over his side.

Pakhet just could not stop laughing. She leaned against the wall of the corridor outside. The situation was just too weird.

"It's not funny, Pakhet!", he protested, once Kah Pak had stopped chanting.

She did her best to grab a hold of herself, but it took her still a few more seconds to properly calm down enough so that she would be able to speak. "Well, in a way it is", she said and looked inside again.

"It is not." Heidenstein carefully checked under his bandages and then took off the patch on his side, before taking it off entirely. While there was a still reddish scar beneath, it seemed that the wound was mostly healed. "Thank you", he said with a sigh to Kah Pak, his voice rather stiff.

The elven shaman shook his head. "You are welcome." Then he turned around to Pakhet. "You said, you wanted to bring me up to speed about the run."

She nodded, still fighting down a chuckle, while Heidenstein was getting rid of the bandages. "It's mostly simple", she said. "In five days there is an Urban Brawl amateur league with short games. We are supposed to steal some equipment and kidnap one of the other players, while filling in as a team ourselves."

Kah Pak nodded to signal he had understood, but did not say anything. Rather he started to collect the bird feathers and bits of fur.

Once they had properly cleaned up the left overs from the ritual and Heidenstein had put on his shirt Pakhet started to explain their plan – though she still had no backup-plan. But other than Slap Kah Pak did not say anything about it. Rather he asked about different things, like what team the boy was playing for and such.

Then, after half an hour he left, as he said he needed to be back with his family. Pakhet still wondered whether he already had children of his own as he did not seem to be that old. But maybe it was just his parents or some sort of uncle.

"We still need to take care of the ambulance", she said to Heidenstein, once Kah Pak was done.

Heidenstein shrugged and sat back onto his chair.

She looked at him. "You are not pissed about this, are you?"

"I am not", he replied.

Geez, what the hell was wrong with him? Maybe it was because she was not used to having social contacts, but she really could not make sense out of his behaviour. She leaned against the stretcher next to his desk and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "What is wrong, Doc?", she asked slowly.

"Nothing", he said.

"God damn it, Doc, something is wrong. Why are you suddenly so... Irritable? Normally that is my job, isn't it?"

This at least made him smile, even though just for a second. "It's nothing, really. It's just... This is the second time I nearly died in... What? About a month? Not quite flattering, eh?"

"Happens", Pakhet said. Her total count of almost dying so far was stuck at five, but only because she had become that much more careful after the third time. "Bad luck. What happened?", she asked again.

He gave a long sigh. "Nothing. As I said: I helped out a friend. Nothing big. Just lending a hand. Something went wrong and he got attacked. I helped out. I got shot at. And I was unlucky enough to be sent to a public hospital, when I fainted. The emergency medic did a horrible job. That's it." He looked onto the turned off screen on his desk.

"I was worried, when you called me", she said. "You know that, right?"

"You don't need to worry about me", he grumbled.

She shrugged: "Well, too late for that."

XXIV – Urban Brawl

It was still in the morning, when Pakhet arrived at the arena. It was one of the old Olympia stadium from Hamburg – of course they did not put amateurs in one of the real Urban Brawl arenas. After all amateur teams were made up of some exec sons, who wanted to feel cool but did not want to risk their asses. Thankfully that also meant this game would be with non lethal ammunition, meaning she would not need to worry about killing the other teams when they were playing for wipe out.

Just on the road towards the arena she also saw the team van pulling up in front of her and followed it onto the parking lot of the stadium, where Crash was already waiting, looking as cheerful as he had sounded on commlink. Right next to Crash a young human man was standing – Pakhet did not know it, but she was rather sure it was Murphy.

“Good morning”, she said towards the two, when she took off her helmet.

This time even she had put on some make-up to make herself not instantly recognizable. She also wore a dark blond wig, as her red dyed hair was rather striking. Murphy apparently directly picked up on that. “Did not think you would ever wear make-up.” He grinned.

“Well, I do. At times”, she replied dryly and waited for the others to get out of the van. Apparently Kah Pak had driven the van – which might have been a good idea, considering the alternatives.

“Heidenstein is on stand-by?”, Slap asked, when he got out of the car. He looked weird in his casual wear.

Pakhet nodded. “He will park the ambulance nearby.”

Slap just nodded and the seven of them moved towards the stadium.

The Johnson had provided them with fake SIDs, though Pakhet was not quite sure whether to trust them. Hence she was relieved when they got checked on the entrance of the stadium and no alarm was raised.

Instead they were guided towards a cabin, where they found the equipment Saeder had provided for this tournament.

Slap immediately took a look at the TacNet, started it up and did – well – something with it. Yeah, a new toy for the tech-guy.

“You know that Murphy will get that thing for the game, right?”, she asked.

The decker grumbled something. “Yeah, I know.”

Murphy gave a long sigh. It seemed he still was not entirely sold on this plan.

“So, what should I do?”, Crash asked with a deep snort.

With a faint smile Pakhet turned towards him. “Well, mostly you need to be frightening – and not to kill anyone.”

“I will try”, the Minotaur replied. “But I am very strong.”

“That's a good point”, Pakhet muttered.

Thankfully it turned out that the organizers of the tournament, had already had the same thought, as some people came over to them and tried to fit Crash with some boxing gloves made for trolls – and somehow they succeeded. What followed was a long discussion about what to do with Crash's legs, as nobody had boots fit for his satyr-like legs and hooves but it was out of the question that a kick from one of the hooves would be potentially deadly.

Pakhet just hoped that Crash had his temper under control when a guy from security

suggested using some sort of packing foil. But while grumbling about it, Crash allowed them to at least put some foil around his hooves.

Once all the teams had arrived at the stadium, there was a long safety introduction, making Pakhet roll her eyes. Was not the entire point of this sport that the general public enjoyed senseless violence? And here they were listening to the twenty-five ways they should be careful not to kill during the games.

Well, it was not really surprising: Out of the three other teams only one was somewhat professional – the Junior Rams, a young version of the Hamburg Rams. The two others were made up half by some sons of rich people and to the other half of semi-professional players who had been paid to actually win matches. Pakhet knew which of those she had to knock out first.

Then – almost three hours after they had arrived at the stadium – there was an opening ceremony, thankfully a brief one.

The entire three hours this run had lasted so far Pakhet had been nervous. She basically just waited for some of the others to be found out. Something just had to happen! Dacart had to let something slip with somebody listening or Slap just being his awkward self. But somehow miraculously nothing the like happened. Nobody even asked about their team – a team Schmidt had named the “Seagulls” – not having played before and yet somehow being registered for this tournament. Were the people really that oblivious?

Well, she thought to herself, better not to question this.

The matches were drawn by lot and – thankfully – they had the first game against the Junior Rams instead of the team their target was a part of. Pakhet considered this as lucky, even though it meant playing on the target's team winning their own match.

“So, what's the plan now?”, Slap asked during those fifteen minutes they had before the match started.

“Well, we win this thing”, Pakhet said. “Look: Murphy, Silent, Kah Pak and you are the Scouts, Dacart is the Outrider, Crash and I are the Heavies. It is your job to not get knocked out and tell us if anyone from the other team comes near out goal area.” She looked at the map of the arena they had just gotten.

Of course the arena was completely designed and did not quite resemble a real neighbourhood like it was in real Urban Brawl games, that took place in actual areas of a city. Instead this was a more or less symmetrical arena with some elements that resembled a harbour area: There were a few containers building more or less a small labyrinth on each side of the field, there were several poles with lights on them and several small housing units, as well as two big ones on each side. In the middle of the field was a tower.

“If we get to choose: Let the others have the ball first”, Pakhet said to Murphy. “Then we don't have to worry about moving enough. If the ball is not moved for ten seconds the other team will get into attack and more importantly people will get a chance to exchange knocked out players. I've looked into the rules of this tournament: As long as all the players of one team in game are knocked out before the team can exchange players they'll loose. So let's play for that. It will make this entire ordeal much more easy.” When nobody objected after a few seconds, she continued. “Dacart. At the beginning of the game take me on the motorcycle and bring me to the tower. Once I am up there, I should be able to knock out the others from up there.”

“Okay”, Dacart replied.

“Good”, she said and just hoped this would work. Even without the money on the line: They needed to win this match to have a chance to get to that boy.

Inside the arena everything looked considerably bigger then from the outside or the plans. Pakhet knew that the area was only eighty times a hundred and sixty meters – but with the rather plainly constructed buildings around them and the dirty asphalt ground under their feet the illusion of an actual play field was almost convincing. The good thing about this arena though was, that it was symmetrical – so they knew what they would find on the side of their enemies.

She herself stood right next to Dacart at the front border of the last zone of the playing field, so that they had the best chances to reach the tower in the middle of the arena first.

To her right was a single larger building as well as some plain field with installed flooding lights. To her left was another large building right next to three row houses. They had put their goal zone on top of the last one. Pakhet hoped that was enough as she knew that a goal by the Junior Rams would mean they would get to exchange players.

The Rams would be playing offensive first, getting the ball. So all they needed to do was to stop them from scoring a goal before all of those guys were down. At least in theory that should be possible, right?

Thankfully the amateurs played without medics in the game.

On the top, right in the middle of the stadium was a big AR display with a countdown. Thirty more seconds. Twenty. Ten.

She got ready. She heard Dacart starting up the motorcycle.

Three, two, one... She jumped on the motorcycle behind Dacart, who started it up and raced towards the tower.

One thing she had to admit: The adept knew how to drive, as he did not only accelerate quickly, but also did not loose control over the vehicle when she jumped of it at the tower. Instead he just drove around the tower to guard the middle line of the arena.

Pakhet was somewhat glad that she had managed to land on her feet. Because she had not been entirely sure whether this stunt would work out for her. She really was not keen on a broken foot. But it had worked and now she ran towards the tower's doorway.

Inside there were winding stairs without balustrades leading to a balustrade at the top level of the tower. And so she ran.

She heard shooting from outside – from the Rams' side of the field. It was automated fire and if her hearing was not of it was the fire of bigger artillery. Probably one of the motorcycle-mounted guns, but of course she was unable to tell whether it was Dacart or the enemies outrider. It did not matter for now. She needed to get up.

Pakhet estimated that it took her about twelve seconds to get up onto the balustrade. Still there was shooting so she looked down.

Apparently Dacart was having a fight against the enemies outrider, but while Dacart was certainly a skilled driver, he was not well with the mounted gun and did not quite manage to hit the outrider.

"Dacart, have him riding towards the tower", Pakhet growled into the helmets mic.

"Rodger that", was the enthusiastic reply she got.

Dacart drove of towards the far side of the field and the other outrider followed him. Having reached almost the far end of the arena, Dacart then made a sharp turn – somehow evading his opponents fire – and drove back toward the tower.

His plan succeeded: The other outrider turned his bike around and followed, allowing

Pakhet to aim directly at his helmet.

She took a breath, exhaled and shot – thankful that the machine gun she had gotten was also able to give of single shots. The shot hit its mark, right on the helmet of the outrider and while it was just a rubber bullet, it was enough to unbalance him so far, that he fell of the motorcycle and onto the ground where he lay motionless.

Then she saw a motion from the corner of her eye. Somebody tried to sneak through the alleyway between the buildings in the back of the playing field and a building right next to the tower. She turned and shot – but this time she missed as she had no good shooting field.

“Crash?”, she whispered. “The alleyway at the right side of the field. Somebody is sneaking through. Can you get him?”

“Sure thing”, the Minotaur answered grimly. “And for a moment I thought you would let the elf-kid take the lead.”

The next thing Pakhet heard were hooves on the asphalt. For a moment she could see Crash bursting through one of the open fields, getting ready to slam. Then there was a loud – well – crash when he burst into that alleyway.

A second later he came through the alleyway shoving a rubbish container, parts of a fence and what appeared to be one of the enemies scouts in front of him.

“I think we have just found one of your talents”, Pakhet muttered, when the audience started to growl. Most probably because they normally did not get to see such brutality in an amateur game. Well, and there never was a way to see the professional league games live in place.

Next thing she knew somebody fired at her in burst. Just in time she managed to duck behind the balustrade, but did not evade the fire completely. And even though it was only rubber rounds it hurt when they hit her in the chest.

“Dacart?”, she muttered into the microphone.

“On it!”, was the prompt reply.

Pakhet shortly looked over the balustrade just to be hit once more by the fire of three automated guns. Three of the Junior Rams – two of them apparently the Heavies – were standing there firing at her making it impossible to return the fire without being hit herself.

Then Dacart drove towards them before drifting the bike sideways to slide at them with a broad front. But while they – somehow – managed to jump aside in the last possible moment, Dacart lost the control over the motorcycle and with it ended up against the next wall and right in front of Crash.

It did not surprise Pakhet, that the adept had lost control. Few people could pull off such a stunt without doing so – and all of them were riggers.

But then something happened, which she could have not foreseen: While two of the Rams standing in front of the tower kept firing at her, the third started to fire at Crash, who seemed to just shrug it off as if it meant nothing.

Then Dacart's voice was audible over their team communication: “Throw me, but don't tell the elf.”

Next thing she heard was Murphy's laughter.

Well, great, so they were a team of old-movie nerds, eh?

Crash meanwhile gave a confident grunt, picked up the trashed motorcycle with Dacart on it – as if it weight no more than a few pounds and before the Junior Rams even knew what was happening he threw the bike at them, burying them beneath it.

The audience was pumped. Why had that boy never picked up this sport before?

“Somebody is here”, sounded Silent's voice over their communication line.

Pakhet looked at the AR display of where everybody was. The dwarf apparently was still with the others at the far end of the field – near their own goal zone.

She heard gun fire – single shot's this time.

“Do they have the ball?”, she asked. There could only be two more players from the other team. One of them had to have the ball.

“They do!”, Murphy replied.

“They won't get past me!”, Silent shouted.

Pakhet rolled her eyes and looked at the AR screen showing the action. She knew the game would be over soon. She had no good shooting field to the alley where they now were fighting and she would not make it there before Crash.

Apparently the last two players had managed to use her distraction with the Heavies to sneak past her. They were now standing right in front of the building on which they had claimed their goal zone.

Silent was firing at them with his gun, while there seemed to be some lightning around one of the players – probably one of Kah Pak's spells. At least it seemed enough to down one of the players. Too bad it was the one carrying the ball.

For a moment Pakhet was worried – but only until Crash got there with the speed of a small motorcycle and literally punched the other player through the wall.

Pakhet just hoped that it had not killed that guy.

But that was it. With this one-punch-hit from Crash the game had ended and even though it had barely taken more than three minutes it seemed that the small audience was pumped.

Pakhet meanwhile was sure of one thing: If he learned to make all of this a bit more – well – epic, he could be the “next big thing”.

Apparently Pakhet was not the only one with that thought, because more and more people gathered in front of their cabin once they had retreated there.

While she was lying down waiting for the effect of the painkillers to kick in there was knocking on the door and muffled calls could be heard inside.

“Well, looks like somebody got some fans”, Dacart said, lying down himself. Once again he had more in common with a mummy than anything else. Why the hell had he hold on to the motorcycle? Pakhet had decided not to ask.

Crash meanwhile did not look very exited about his newfound popularity. He sat on a bench and threw the door angry looks, while his name was shouted outside.

“Problem”, Slap said. “I could not hack into the stadiums network from inside the arena.”

“Then do it now”, Crash grunted.

“I would. But they are watching us”, Slap replied nodding at a security camera in the corner of the cabin.

The Minotaur just gave another grunt and got up. As it to stretch his muscles he walked a bit before leaning at the wall in front of the camera. As this stadium was rather old and the rooms just barely big enough for Crash to stand upright this was probably enough to block the cams view. “Better?”, the Minotaur asked.

Slap nodded and got out his wire. “Could you put that at the camera's wire?”

“Sure”, Crash said and only a few seconds later Slap “fainted” when he started to hack the system.

The knocking and calls seemed to get louder.

“Pakhet?”, a voice startled her. It was Murphy, who was now standing at her feet.

Slowly she sat up. Her chest was still hurting from the rubber rounds. “What is it?”

"A word?", he replied and nodded at the corner.

Pakhet shrugged and went to the corner with him. "Spit it out", she said.

"Well, I am not quite sure how we will go about the entire 'getting the TacNet out' ordeal", he said with some hesitation.

"One of us knocks you out", she replied.

"One of us like in Crash?", the boy asked.

Yet again she shrugged. "Well, he would make it seem most dramatic. And I think he can sell the entire 'not having his temper under control' part best."

Murphy cringed. "That's what I am worried about." For a moment he paused and looked over to the Minotaur. "I don't think he likes me."

Pakhet gave a long sigh.

"Also I think nobody can get the security to overlook two people in one ambulance like I can", he added.

Considering that the boy seemed to be able to pull off some sort of mind tricks there might be something to that, Pakhet had to admit. "Well, okay. I'll do it. I get Crash to hit me. You talk the people into overlooking the entire 'two people' ordeal... As well as the TacNet."

Murphy seemed to be really relieved – even though it was always hard to tell what was an act and what the truth with a face. "Thanks, Pakhet", he said with a smile. "But I'll still get the ice cream?"

She replied with a faint smile: "We'll see about that."

"Okay", Murphy replied.

More knocks sounded on the door, while Pakhet turned around and saw that Slap was once again conscious. "Change of plans", she then announced to the others. "I'll play the 'team leader' for the next game. And Crash", she looked at the Minotaur, who gave another grunt to signal he was listening, "you'll have to knock me out. Just don't kill me."

He gave a grin, showing his tusks. "I'll do my best."

"Now what do we do about the people out there?", Silent asked.

"I think that is mostly up to Crash", Kah Pak said and looked at the Minotaur.

"I don't know", Crash admitted and shot the door another angry look.

Slap coughed. "Well, Crash... How old are you?"

"Nineteen", the Minotaur replied. This surprised Pakhet as even for a goblinized race she would have thought him to be at least in his twenties.

"Well then, Crash", Slap said. "Just a friendly advise: I think this could be your way out of the shadows. You are still young. So... Think about it."

It seemed that the Minotaur was thinking. "But I don't even have a proper SIN."

Slap gave a faint smile. "We can take care of that later. It will probably suffice for now."

Crash once again looked at the door. All of this did not seem to be quite sane to him. Well, considering how much he stood out from the crowd, it was maybe not that much of a surprise. He seemed to be hesitant. "Well... Okay."

It was at that moment that Murphy got to the door. He quickly checked his clothing – as well as his fake reflection in the mirror, before he opened the door. "Please, gentleman! Ladies!", he shouted before the people in front of the door could trample him down.

Pakhet could not help but wonder how all of them got here so quickly.

"Please! Calm down! I am this team's manager", Murphy introduced himself. "Now if you'd all calm down. I'll speak for Mr. Brüger. So, everyone who is interested in hiring

him now name your price.”
And prizes they named.

XXV – Born to play

Pakhet somehow considered it irony that the Rams – the actual Rams, not their Juniors – were it that hired Crash for a total of one point five million. The hell, maybe she should think about switching gears – Urban Brawl seemed to be lucrative.

“Remember”, she said before they went out on the field again. “I’ll need to lay low during the game.” After all she knew that she would have to allow Crash to hit her after the match – and she did not want that to happen while she was already injured.

“I still don’t think your tactic qualifies as such”, Slap muttered.

Pakhet looked at him with the hint of a grin. “I have a tactic. The tactic’s name is Crash. Right, Crash?”

The Minotaur seemed to be amused by this. He gave a grin and a deep huff.

Originally Pakhet had not thought that her initial plan would work – but after having seen Crash during their first game, she felt more confident that they might actually be able to win this tournament and reach their mission goal. She was still not quite keen to be hit by the Minotaur, but it seemed that for the most part he actually had his strength under control.

“Then let’s just hope, this tactic works”, Slap muttered.

All in all they knew what they were going to do this round. Pakhet knew that the same tactic would not work twice and sitting herself on that tower would put her in a prone position to get knocked out before the end of the match – and she rather did not want to risk that.

Hence she had concluded that she would take position in the highest building on their side of the field – together with Slap and Kah Pak. Slap, as the only thing he could legally do was to look for matrix icons of approaching enemies, while Kah Pak could actually somewhat defend her – as the amateur games somehow allowed for magic.

Meanwhile Dacart and Crash had exchanged positions – making Dacart the Heavy and Crash the Outrider. Not because Crash was a driver by any means, but rather because the motorcycle was by now a piece of trash and not working after having been used as a throwing weapon. And as they would not get another motorcycle they had decided that Crash would be the outrider, just so he could use the broken bike as a shield and bludgeoning weapon.

And so the second – and thankfully final – game began for them. Once again they were lucky enough: The other team got the first attack move. Meaning they would not have to worry about moving the ball.

This time they put their goal zone right inside the (Innenhof) of one of the buildings.

As the yard only had one proper (Zugang) and Pakhet had good aim at it from where she would position herself.

Murphy would stay directly at the goal zone, while Dacart and Silent would each watch one of the side to prevent somebody from sneaking through. Crash – of course – would be their heavy, heavy hitter.

The target areas were marked and then the game started.

Followed by Slap and Kah Pak Pakhet ran for the building and without waiting for the others positioned herself at the window of the top floor and watch the zone border.

Thankfully the borders were marked in AR making it easier to keep overview over the playing field.

But for now she did not see anybody.

Slap and Kah Pak reached the floor after her, with Kah Pak taking position on the other window, while Slap just sat down at the back wall – as far away as possible from any window.

The first thing she heard was Dacart. He had positioned himself at the right side of the playing field between the small container labyrinth. "Eh, Pakhet? Somebody is here..."

"So?"

"Err, I... Well, I don't think I should knock him out just yet", he said suggestively. Well, look at that, even Dacart had the wits to not talk about their mission target – after all the wireless connection was probably controlled.

"Then buy yourself some time", she replied.

"Oh. Okay. I'll try", was the reply.

Well, hopefully he would not mess it up. But then again: He was at least quick, so maybe he was intelligent enough to use that to his advantage.

Soon Pakhet heard gun fire from the area around the containers. And looking at the AR screen she could confirm that he was having a fight that would have done "Neo, the One" proud, as both he and the boy evaded all of the other's attacks.

It was then that Slap talked to her. "I've got something", he said and in the next moment seven more icons appeared on the map of the TacNet. Apparently their opponents.

Two of them were lingering just on the other side of the tower, one was inside the tower, then there was the guy – their target – who was in a fight between the containers and somebody else, who was sneaking along on the left side of the field.

The last guy – from the speed of his movement probably the Outrider – was still at the very end of their opponent's half of the field, where he moved from one side to the other.

This icon got marked by Slap. "Do you think you can pull of another miracle shot?"

"I can try", she replied.

To say she had a bad shooting field was an understatement. Now that she knew where the opponent's outrider was, she could see him for a split second whenever he was visible between the tower and the outer containers on their side of the field.

She aimed at the point where she had last seen him and waited for him to cross. Once, twice, trice. She needed to get a feeling for how long it took him from one to cross from one side to the other, as the AR display from the TacNet just was not accurate enough. Then, just before she could see him again, she shot and held her breath. The outrider appeared just as the rubber round hit him – apparently in the shoulder. And for a moment it seemed he would manage to keep his balance, but then the bike started to swerve. And while he disappeared from Pakhet's field of view.

The icon marked on the TacNet confirmed that he was out cold. Good.

But before she could feel to confident about having made that chance a burst of automated fire hit her in the left shoulder. Quickly she ducked down and moved to the side of the window so she could hide behind the wall.

Kah Pak, too, ducked. "You alright?", he said once he had found proper cover.

"Yep", she replied. Thankfully the burst had mostly hit her arm. "Crash?", she said into the mic.

"On it", the Minotaur replied with grim defense.

Pakhet looked at the tactical map. Dacart was still locked into a fight with their target, two of their opponents were now moving around at the border of two zones in the back of their half of the field. They probably had the ball.

Two opponents were now on the top of the tower – they had been the one firing at her – with another guy waiting at the back of the tower.

"Crash", she said when she realized something. "I think this is a trap."

"You bet it is", Slap said.

"I've seen it", the Minotaur replied, when he ran into the tower.

Risking a short gaze up onto the AR screen she saw Crash running up the stairs, where he was hit with heavy burst fire. He used the motorcycle as a shield, when another burst of fire hit him from beneath – so it was a trap.

The three guys in the tower – two of them trolls, one an ork and all of them probably the bought professionals of their opponent team.

For a second or two Crash tried to move towards the two on the top but then decided against it. He yerked the motorcycle up and then threw it at the two of them. As the balustrade on the top was not very wide they had no chance to evade. Worse for them: When one tried to evade he lost his balance and fell down.

Pakhet winced, hoping that guy did not die. She did not want them to get disqualified for a death – not to mention that a sport was nothing worse killing over, at least not if she could help it. Well, he was a troll and trolls were tough.

Meanwhile Crash jumped down on the last guy – the second troll – foiled up hoof first. It was not surprising that it took that guy out cold.

The two on the left side of the field moved – over the roofs of the small houses. Here Silent was waiting and started firing at them. While the AR screen still showed Crash, one of the icons was marked as K.O., so apparently Silent for once had managed to knock somebody out.

Crash, after making sure the troll was really unconscious, ran out of the tower and then managed a record-sprint over to the containers.

“What are you doing, Crash?”, Pakhet asked, when she realized he got ready for a tackle.

“Ending this”, he replied. “Dacart. Out of the way.”

“What?”, the voice of Dacart was heard.

Then Crash slammed into on of the containers behind which – from Crash's point of view – Dacart and their target were still having their weird evasion-battle.

Somehow Dacart managed to jump aside to not be squished in between the two containers, but his opponent was not so lucky.

Only a second later the message that the game had ended appeared in AR.

“What?”, Pakhet muttered confused.

“That last guy has given up”, Silent explained to everyone.

Pakhet got up and looked over. What was Crash thinking? Had he done this on purpose? He should have known that they needed to get that kid out alive – and humans tended to die when hit with a container. Or was he planning one starting a fight. If so, this was still a stupid idea!

She ran down the stairs of the building and towards the containers, where Crash was still standing and watching the medics who took care of the boy, while he was casually

moving the containers aside.

"What have you been thinking?", she yelled at him. "That kid could have died!"

Crash looked at the medics. "Well, he didn't", he answered with a grunt, when the medics gave the sign that the boy was just unconscious.

"But you willingly risked him to die!", she continued.

"So?", the Minotaur replied, his voice angry, too.

"You could've gotten us disqualified!", Pakhet replied. "We were not here to kill!"

"I don't care!", Crash now yelled back.

Well, this was as good of a chance as any to get knocked out by him – she just hoped he was able to control himself enough right now. "Then you're out of the team."

"You've gotta be kidding me!", the Minotaur replied on the top of his lungs. "I am the only reason we one!"

"And the reason we almost got disqualified!"

"Just shut the fuck up!", he yelled. And there it was – his fist.

She had to force her self not to evade and when the big fist of the minotaur hit her into the head. Then everything went to black.

When Pakhet regained consciousness she lay on a stretcher with an infusion attached to her collar bone. Her head hurt and it took her a few moments to realize that she was in an ambulance – or rather their make-shift ambulance.

So Murphy had succeeded at least with that? She moved her head and saw Heidenstein somehow standing between her stretcher and a second one.

Okay. Murphy had even succeeded with talking somebody into putting both her and the boy in the same ambulance. Somehow. It had to be a mind trick.

"Is that the boy?", she asked.

Heidenstein turned around to her. "You are awake", he said – apparently relieved.

"Seems so", she muttered. "But my head hurts."

"I bet it does", he replied. "You've scared me quite a bit. Why was it you? Wasn't Murphy supposed to..."

"The elf got scared", Pakhet replied and tried to sit up. "And he had a point saying that he would be the one best suited to talk them into... All of this."

Heidenstein held her down. "Do not sit up yet", he warned her. "Wait, okay?"

"Okay", she replied with a sigh. The truth was, she was rather sure that she would faint again if she sat up. "Tell me at least whether we've got the TacNet."

"We do", the doc replied with a faint smile. "Murphy made such a fuzz about you being hit by Crash, that at some point nobody even tried to argue with him."

"The boy is a mind mage or something, eh?", she muttered and dimmed down the light reception of her eyes as right now her brain seemed not ready to deal with that much light.

"Or he is just a really good actor", he replied. "Relax. Considering who hit you, you are in rather good condition, but you had a small laceration and I want you in the CT once we are back at the hospital."

"Okay", she muttered.

"Well, then let me take care of the boy", Heidenstein said.

"How is he?", Pakhet asked.

"He will survive it. But still: Three broken ribs, a broken arm and quite a few contusion. So... He could be better", the doc replied. "I don't think our Johnson will be thrilled."

"Well, the boy is alive", Pakhet muttered.

"And Crash has acted out that berserker quite well", he said while getting to work on the boy again. "He was taken to calm down, when I arrived there."

"You think he acted this?", she asked.

Heidenstein shrugged. "I guess so. I think if he really had been that angry you would be dead."

Pakhet sighed. Well, that would have been a weird way to go. "So I guess yay for acting."

"Yap", he replied. "And you won the tournament. So as long as the others don't blow their cover last minute I guess we get another hundred thousand."

"Well, they have the elf kid", Pakhet muttered and prayed this was enough. After all leaving Dacart, Slap and Silent without surveillance for too long was just the perfect recipe for disaster. But, well, if those three idiots got themselves in trouble it now would not be her problem.

After having taken care of most of the boys injuries Heidenstein drove them over to Harburg. While they waited to get the boy out of the garage for Kah Pak or somebody else to come by and lend a hand Heidenstein helped Pakhet inside.

Schmidt was already waiting for them, but that did not stop Pakhet from lying down onto the bed Heidenstein led her to.

"Well, those games were something.. Interesting", Schmidt said, while Heidenstein reattached the infusion to the needle. "It seems taking along that Minotaur was a good decision." He paused. "Do you have gotten everything?"

"The boy is still in the ambulance", Pakhet replied. "And I guess the TacNet is, too."

"I'll get it in a minute", Heidenstein replied while getting a syringe out of his med-kit.

"No hurry", Schmidt replied. "And the other's are still at their victory ceremony, I figure."

"Hopefully", Pakhet muttered. She could see Schmidt nod.

"I have to say, for the most part I am impressed. One question though: How is the boy?"

"Alive", Heidenstein replied. "He will live. He won't have any complications."

"Well, I guess that his father can ask for", Schmidt said with a sigh. "For a moment I was worried the Minotaur had killed him."

"Me, too", Pakhet murmured.

Schmidt gave another nod. "Well, good job." He went out of the room, assumably back to the kitchen.

Heidenstein spent the next minutes to take care of her. He administered some painkiller through the infusion-needle and put a cooling pad onto her forehead.

She had to admit, the cooling pad felt great and slowly she could feel the pain numbing. When Heidenstein left her to get the TacNet – and maybe the boy with the help of Schmidt – she closed her eyes and fell into a relaxing doze, that lasted until the door bell rang, She knew it was the others.

Slowly she opened her eyes and sat up. This time she was able to, without too much pain or feeling dizzy. The infusion by now had finished, so she carefully removed the needle from her collar bone and stood up. Then she remembered the cooling patch, which by now had warmed up quite a bit, and took it off, too.

She was still a bit weak-kneed, but considering that she had just been knocked unconscious by the Minotaur, that was not that surprising.

"Careful", Heidenstein said, when he saw her in the door.

"I know", she replied and rolled her eyes. She sat down on one of the chairs in the kitchen. Normally she would have laid down, but she still remembered what Schmidt had said before the run: If everything worked out on this run, he would give them a run-through of what the "big run" he had hired them for would be. "I feel better now", she added.

"Pakhet?" Dacart's voice sounded from the hallway.

"In the kitchen", she replied without yelling.

The door opened and Dacart came in, carrying her gym bag. "Here", he said. "I also brought your motorcycle."

"Thanks", she said and took the bag. She realized that it had been opened and not properly closed afterwards. "What happened to it?"

"Ah, you know. I just had to look through the stuff for your keys."

"You looked through my stuff?", Pakhet asked an eyebrow raised.

Apparently it was only now that Dacart realized that this might have angered her. He shot her an rather afraid look. "Uh, yeah? I needed the keys."

For a moment Pakhet considered to give him a talk, but then she sighed. If she got angry at him, she felt she would just get another head ache. She just put the bag beneath the table and gave a low grunt.

Dacart waited for a while until he realized that she would not shunt him. He seemed to relax. "Well, Doc? I think I might faint in a few minutes, so..."

"What have you done again?", Heidenstein asked.

"Uh, they used some patches on me before and I think their effect wears off... I feel, strange...", Dacart murmured.

Heidenstein gave a long sigh and went over to him. "Well, that means you should lie down." He escorted Dacart to one of the other rooms – well, at least it seemed that Schmidt had stocked the house up on beds. Maybe a good decision.

It took a few minutes before Heidenstein came back and then sat down on the table, too.

"Where is the rest of the idiots?", Pakhet muttered and wished for nothing more than a cup of hot coffee.

Heidenstein shrugged.

Pakhet could also not help but wonder, where Schmidt had gone, as he right now was not in the kitchen. Considering though, that he was a fixer, there was a good chance that he was busy organizing something or getting information.

Still, as she herself did not feel much like talking the minutes drew themselves out, until finally the door bell rang again.

"Finally", Pakhet muttered.

There was some movement and then Schmidt came through the room to go over to the hallway outside. Just a moment later it was not the noise, but the smell that told them that finally the rest of the group had arrived, as Crash's smell was rather recognizable.

Soon the others – including Murphy – came inside, though Crash had to move sideways through the door that was clearly build in a time before the goblinization first occurred.

"So?", Pakhet said and looked at them.

"We have the money", came Silent's smug reply.

"Good", she replied.

"Then everything went without problem?", Heidenstein asked.

Slap sat down and crossed his arms. "Actually there was a problem: You guys really should give the rest of us the code for the god damn car. *Our* car, I might add."

For a moment Pakhet was not sure what he was talking about. She looked at Heidenstein, who seemed a bit surprised himself. Then she realized, that Slap was talking about the team van. Heidenstein had given her the code to drive the car, but apparently not the others. Well, maybe not a bad idea, considering their antics.

"Oh", he said. "Yeah, I'll give it to you later."

Slap nodded, but still held his arms crossed.

For a while Pakhet felt Murphy's gaze on her and it seemed as if the boy wanted to say something, but then he did not and just shot her a smile.

Now that Schmidt was in the room, too, Pakhet looked at him. "Now, what about the 'big run'?", she asked.

Schmidt smiled and looked at everyone of them, including Crash and Murphy. The Minotaur still had to stand bent down, while Murphy just leaned against a wall. "Well, alright", he finally said. "I told you before: You are going to be the back-up for a team of elite runners. This means: You only move in, if they get into troubles. You are their extraction team." He gave a sigh. "If it is feasible for you to finish the job in the case

that first team runs into problems.”

“So, what is this run about?”, Slap asked.

“Well, there is a gas rig out on the North Sea owned by Saeder-Krupp”, Schmidt explained. “While they still produce some gas, it is barely enough to sustain the rig. But your constituent has information, that the rig now doubles as a research facility doing some questionable research. The main team will be sent in to get more information about the facility and their research. That is the mission goal.” He looked around once more. “I actually had planned to prepare you better for that mission and now we are running out of time. I still want you to learn at least basics in diving and boating, just in case. Well, and if any of you don't know how to swim, you have your work cut out for you.”

Pakhet gave a faint smile. “Well, Heidenstein and I have taken a boating class, so we are good in that field.”

To that Schmidt gave her a look, then Heidenstein, who nodded. “Good”, he then said. “Now there is the question, who is coming along.”

That indeed was a good question, as in all honesty Pakhet could remember better things to do than accompany those idiots onto the North Sea. After all the ocean was known for toxic spirit activity. Not only that: If something happened – like something or someone sinking their boat – they would be sitting ducks. And considering it was a gas rig, a rig producing something highly explosive, it was rather discomfoting to think that somebody who had been involved with a big explosion before – like Dacart – would be on that rig together with her.

She gave Heidenstein a look and he looked back at her. He would go, she knew it, and she just could not let him do it alone.

It was Murphy, though, who spoke first. “Well, I'd prefer to not go. It's the North Sea and... Let's just put it like this: There are a few spirits out there, that might not like me.”

Pakhet gave him a look. She rather doubted, that his sweet talking would be worth anything out there, so she nodded. “Okay. No problem.” Then she looked back at Schmidt. “Well, I *guess* I'll go.”

“Well, I think the rest of us will go”, Slap said and looked at the others. “Or is there anyone of you, who won't go.”

Kah Pak and Silent shook their heads.

“What about you, Crash?”, Pakhet asked and looked over to the Minotaur, who nodded.

“I guess, I can go”, he replied with his deep voice. “If I get a fair share of the reward.”

"Of course", Pakhet said and ignored Silent, who shouted out: "What?"

"Good", Crash replied and nodded.

XXVI – Ice cream

“You'll need to shut down the eyes and the arms”, Heidenstein said, while Pakhet lay down onto the couch going into the CT.

“I feared so”, Pakhet muttered. She knew that the newer tomographs worked with electric waves. But of course she never liked it. Without the cyber eyes she could not see and without her arms she could not defend herself.

“You'll just need to shut them off shortly”, Heidenstein said as if he knew what she was thinking.

She gave a long sigh. “I know.” She closed her eyes, before giving the mental command to shut them off. Another command and she shut down the arms, making her unable to move them or even feel them at all. She hated this feeling.

“It will only take a minute”, she heard Heidenstein say.

“Just hurry up”, she muttered.

She could feel the couch move into the CT and heard the noise created by the machine. In fact she was thankful that she had not to take out the eyes for this, because there was just no worse feeling then just being aware that her eye sockets were actually empty.

While the machine was working, she felt more and more uneasy, but she tried to hide it lying motionless on the couch. Relieve filled her once she could feel the couch moving out of the CT. “Can I turn the ware back on?”, she asked out loud.

“Yes”, she heard his reply.

Once again she gave a mental comment, glad that it was all it took. She knew older ware from just twenty or thirty years ago had manual, mechanic switches that had to be pressed to turn the ware on and off. For her it would have been impossible to turn her arms off or on by herself, as both her arms had been replaces with ware.

“Can I get up?”, she asked, when her vision returned and feelings returned to her arms, even though those still did not feel right.

“Wait one more minute”, Heidenstein replied.

Pakhet gave a long sigh and looked up to the ceiling of the room. She understood that he was worried, but the couch was rather uncomfortable and she rather would like to lay down properly to get a few hours of sleep. After all sleep was the best way to cure head aches – to her experience at least.

“Well, it seem you are alright”, Heidenstein finally said.

She looked over to him, as he was still looking at the AR displays of the CT. His eyes were still scanning the 3D-display for anything unusual, but finally he seemed content. "Well, it seems you are lucky. Nothing is broken and there is no bleeding inside the brain. Crash seems to have actually quite a good control over his strength."

Pakhet sat up. "Thankfully so, I guess."

Heidenstein looked at her. "Well, never the less you should lie down for at least a day. You have a light concussion and will probably get a nasty bump."

"I can do that, I think", she replied with a faint smile.

"Sure?", he asked, looking at her with a smile on her face himself.

She got up. "As long as I can wear something more dignified." She looked at the johnny she was wearing.

"I don't think that's a problem", Heidenstein replied.

"Good." With that she stood up and went to the changing cabin next to the exam room.

Maybe an hour later they were sitting on the sofa of Heidenstein's make-shift apartment, eating some soy-noodles with sauce. Pakhet would have preferred proper food made out of real grain, but she also did not feel like ordering something. So she had to content herself with the soy-food while they were watching news, before Heidenstein agreed to watch some medical soap operas, just so she could enjoy his ranting.

It was just after eleven in the evening, when Heidenstein turned off the trideo. "I think I'll go to bed. And you might want to lay down, too."

"I know", she said, as she felt that her head-ache was returning. But there was still something she had been thinking about for days now. The entire CT-ordeal had made it just more urging. "Doc?", she asked faintly.

Half in the movement of standing up, he turned to look at her. "What is it?"

Pakhet hesitated for a while. "Well, I thought about what you said, you know? About the arms. And if you say, that the flesh-arms won't be any worse physically then these are, I'll do it."

"If we upgrade you via gene treatment, they will be as good as your cyber-arms", Heidenstein said. "Maybe even better."

"Okay", Pakhet replied with a long sigh. It was still a weird thought to consider that she might have real, warm hands with real feeling. Arms, that can be hurt.

Heidenstein, too, hesitated. "For what it's worth: I think it is a good decision."

Pakhet spent the next day, doing as Heidenstein had said: Lying down. She still had some head-ache and hence actually enjoyed just resting. And after all there was nothing that could be done, as just around noon a sudden freak storm started to blow over Hamburg. And as if a storm was not bad enough it also caused some electric malfunction.

And even though black-outs were rare out of the sprawls, there was about half an hour of such a black-out in Bergedorf. But as they were in a hospital and hence had an emergency generator they were barely affected by it.

Somewhere in her subconscious she knew that she should have more thoughts about staying in the hospital again. Yet she was somehow okay with it. After all she admitted by now, that she considered Heidenstein as a friend. And while she never stayed over night with Robert, she told herself that it was, because Robert only had a one-room apartment.

And for most of the day Heidenstein was down in the street clinic, building something he said. Apparently he was already preparing for the gas-rig. Pakhet was eager to prepare for it herself, but at least for this day she was keeping her promise to rest.

This of course did not mean, that she was not at least thinking about what she would need to do before going on that run. She planned on getting herself a better armour – just in case – as well as a better assault rifle, as she doubted that the Parashield would do her much good on that rig. She also would need to stack up on grenades and considering what Schmidt had said about them learning to dive it was probably a good idea to stack up on some diving supplies. Thankfully they had some Saeder-Krupp conscript and hopefully would be able to buy something from S-K.

With all of that in mind she spent her afternoon in the guest bed looking up things out of several catalogues from S-K on her commlink. Mostly she was looking for some prices to see how much she would have to spent on the equipment she would need.

In the early evening the storm ceased and news appeared, that it had been caused by a huge toxic spirit wrecking havoc in the harbour, which then just returned into the North Sea after a few hours.

It was somewhat after the storm had ceased that her commlink started to buzz. At first she did not recognize the number, but she recognized the picture from the video call immediately.

“Hey, Pakhet”, Murphy said grinning into the camera.

So what did he want? “Hey, Murphy”, she said and raised an eyebrow.

“I kinda did not get to ask about that yesterday”, the elven boy said. “But what is about my ice cream?”

Geez, the boy really had taken that offer quite serious, eh? Well, in a way at least, as it was clear that he just wanted to make sure she was to pay up on her joke. "I guess you deserve that."

"See", Murphy replied. "So, when do we meet?"

Pakhet sighed, before thinking about it. "Well, the doc was quite adamant that I'd stay down today. So what about tomorrow in the afternoon? 3 p.m.", she suggested.

The grin on the elf's face broadened. "Sounds fun", he said. "So where do we meet?"

"You know the shopping arcade near where the old harbour was in the north of Mitte?", she asked.

He nodded. "Yeah, of course."

"Let's meet there tomorrow afternoon", Pakhet said.

"Okay", Murphy replied. "I am looking forward to it."

"I bet you are", Pakhet sighed.

"See you tomorrow", the elf said.

"Yeah..." Pakhet hung up and shook her head. Great, so she was about to babysit a teenage elf. But the hell – she had said she would pay him in ice cream and who was she to break her word?

In the end Pakhet spent the rest of the day and the night at the hospital. Maybe the worst part about this was, that Heidenstein did not even say anything to it. It seemed to not even be a question, that she stayed here. Well, maybe she really she should get worried about it after all. But then again what else was she to do?

At least the small cut healed up rather quickly and for the most part she had barely any more head-ache when she got up the next day.

"So you are up again?", Heidenstein asked, when she came down to the shadow clinic. He was sitting in parts of his chemical laboratory doing – well – something sciency.

"Yep", she replied taking a sip of coffee as she had not been able to help herself and had taken a mug with her. He had a block with actual paper lying in front of him, making her once more roll her eyes. For actually not being that much older then her, he played the old guy part pretty well.

He was using his equipment, which was hooked up to a computer, to apparently run some sort of simulation, while he was taking notes. He shot her a short look. "Then you are feeling better?"

"Well enough", she said and took another sip of coffee. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to mix together a combat drug", he replied, making her raise an eyebrow again.

She did not think too highly of any sort of drugs – well, except alcohol – especially combat drugs. "So, you are going to be a drug lord next?", she asked.

"Not quite." He sighed and turned around. "I am trying to mix up a combat drug for myself, so that I – if needed – can be of better help in fight."

"So, you are trying a Mr. Hyde?", she asked, eyebrows still raised.

"Well, hopefully not that drastic", he replied.

"Hopefully", she muttered. The last think she would need out on that gas-rig was a doc that had gone out of control.

He gave her a hurt look. "You know, I actually know what I am doing."

"That's what Jekyll said", she replied dryly.

At that he just sighed. "Suite yourself. I take it that you won't be interested in a custom fitted combat drug."

"So far I never have taken any combat drugs, so: No", she said.

Heidenstein shrugged and got back to work, while she kept standing in the doorway nipping on her hot coffee. Only after a few more minutes she raised her voice again. "You know, about Schmidt's big run. I am thinking about getting a proper armour for that – and some other equipment, so... I guess I will go shopping tomorrow. Are you coming along?"

This time he did not look up from his work. "Sound's like a good idea. Why not today?"

"You know I promised Murphy some ice cream, right?", she said.

"Yeah. So you meeting with him, I figure", Heidenstein assumed.

"Pretty much." She put her now empty mug down and went, to have a look at his notes. She did recognize some of the chemical formulae, but was not entirely sure what this was supposed to do. Considering that he was using hand writing – something she most certainly was not used to – it did not make it any easier. "Whatever", she muttered when she decided that she did not care enough about it to try and properly understand it.

In the end she turned around and wanted to go, when it was Heidenstein, who started to talk again: "Once more question, Pakhet."

She just had taken the mug back up to bring it upstairs, when she turned around.
"Hmm?"

"There was something else, I asked you about, do you remember?", he said looking over to her.

At that she had to think for a short while. She had already talked about his suggestion to clone her arms and it was pretty clear that – against better knowledge – she would for now stay with the little "team" of theirs. But then she remembered. He was talking about medicine. At least she hoped he was. "You mean the teaching thing?"

"Yeah, that", he replied with a faint smile.

Actually Pakhet had mostly forgotten about that. But she remembered that he had offered her to learn more about medicine, to learn about to properly do a surgery from him. Having forgotten about it, she of course had barely given it any more thought, making her unsure how to reply. "Oh, that", she said and made a long pause to buy herself more time. A part of her still wanted to agree with it – and be it just to show him, that she could be a good doctor. Another part, though, protested heavily as she could not shake the feeling that it would turn her into something she was not. "Well, I guess that it would be helpful", she said vaguely. "I guess we could try something *after* we are back from that gas-rig. If we return, that is." Her tone was dry. Somehow she was still sure that Silent, Dacart or even Slap would find a way to kill them out there.

"Good enough, I guess", he sighed. "Though I could use a helping hand out there, too."

"You might get two helping hands, as long as those are not too busy keeping things away from you."

He smiled and gave a sigh. "Fair enough."

The shopping arcades were in a modern part of Neue Mitte, near to the harbour. Pakhet knew that the arcades had been build right where another arcade once had been standing before the black flood. When the water retreated, they had rebuild the arcade at least in function, as the architecture had been completely renewed.

The building was modern and most of its outer walls were made of glass and metal, reflecting the beams of the sun that managed to find their way through the smoggy air. All in all it was actually a rather nice day. The sky was mostly blue. The only thing that was off, was the fact that the wind was blowing from the sea, keeping the pollution gasses above the city.

Even though it was the beginning of the week the arcades were buzzing with life. Mostly young people, teenagers and a few students, were walking through the shops, sitting in the cafes and generally seemed to have a good time. It was the afternoon and school was probably over for them. Maybe it was even vacation time? It was so

long since Pakhet had visited school, that she did not really know.

Of course there were some adults around, too. People that were probably either working shifts or not working at all. After all: Even in the sixth world there were people, who had a husband or a wife working, while staying at home themselves. And maybe some of them had jobs that mostly took place at night.

Pakhet found Murphy standing at the entrance waiting for her. He was looking like an elf again – and like a teenager, fitting right in with most of the other visitors. Just like both times she had seen him in the safe-house he had short brown hairs and blue eyes. Once he saw her, a grin appeared on his face and he waved at her.

And with the thought that – all things considered – she owed him what she had promised, she shrugged and went over to him. “Hey, Murphy”, she said though it was audible that she had to suppress a sigh.

“Hey, Pakhet”, he echoed her tone perfectly, before grinning again. And there was a certain child-like sincerity in this grin that Pakhet could not quite decide whether it was charming or creepy. There was a moment of silence, before he added: “So, where are we going?”

“To a place that has real ice cream”, she replied.

“Real like in with real milk?”, he asked.

With a faint smile on her face she nodded. “Exactly that.” She looked through the arcades' glass doors. “Well, let's go.”

Murphy nodded and followed her, when she went inside the arcades.

Even though it was not that hot outside, the aircon was apparently running at full power inside. Well, she just hoped she did not catch a cold from it – because she knew she had to be on that gas-rig in twelve days.

“So, how are you feeling?”, Murphy started chatting, while they were standing on the escalator. “I bet that punch had hurt.”

“You don't say”, Pakhet muttered. “But it's alright. Just a small bump. The big guy has actually good control over his strength.”

“Now he only needs control over his smell”, Murphy said with a dramatic sigh.

She shrugged. Sure, the Minotaur stank but as this was not the only weird thing about him, so she had just done her best to ignore it. “You better don't say it in front of him.”

“I'll try”, he replied. “Though sometimes things might slip out.”

Pakhet sighed. Was the boy just playing though or was his simply not that attached to

his life? "So you are really playing his manager, then?"

"Yep." Murphy grinned.

"And I thought you were afraid of him", she teased him.

They arrived on the second floor, when the elf gave a shrug. "I am not keen on being hit by him. But he is a nice, big guy... Who still cannot stand me, but we can work on that, right?"

"Your funeral", Pakhet replied and gave him a smug look, before she turned to lead the way to the cafe she was looking for.

"I can watch out for myself", the boy replied. "Even if he gets angry at me, I am quicker than him!"

"Until you are not", she said.

Murphy just shrugged and grinned and followed her, when she went for the ice cream parlour she had been looking for.

She sat down at one of the tables right in front of the parlour and looked at the menu in AR. She had been here before, but she was curious whether there were any special offers. Especially as prices for real products were changing all the time.

"AR menus, eh?", Murphy asked and got out sunglasses. "I should've put in my contacts."

Pakhet shot him a look. "Well, I don't need anything like that."

"I know", he replied and paused for a while. "But doesn't it feel weird?"

People asked that question definitely too often. She had always thought it was common knowledge that this kind of question was considered rude – but by now she felt like she had to correct herself. And so she just shrugged, as she did not feel like answering the question.

At least the boy seemed aware that he had somewhat offended her, as he changed the subject rather quickly. "So I can order real ice cream? Made of milk?"

"Yep", Pakhet said before adding: "As long as you are not lactose-intolerant."

Murphy hesitated. "Actually I don't know... I am not sure whether I ever had real milk."

Well, obviously not. He was still young, right, and many that were born in the sixth world had never tried milk, corn or real fruits and vegetables. Considering that many shadowrunners were just poor chummers that tried to make a living and knew nothing but the streets the percentage of people who knew such things in the shadows was probably even smaller.

"I guess we'll take that risk then", she replied.

"If you say so." The boy shot her a smile. "Is there anything you would recommend?"

"How about a strawberry chocolate sundae?", she suggested. She did not really like chocolate or strawberries, but kids liked at least the chocolate part, right?

Murphy shrugged. "Okay. Then I'll take that."

Pakhet nodded and ordered. A sundae for the elf, an iced coffee for herself, as she barely ate anything sweet. As the order worked through the AR as well, she had just to wait for the things to be brought to their table. At least there was still some service personal here – as there were quite a few cheap cafes and restaurants that did everything but the cooking automated.

"Wow, that is actually quite a lot", Murphy exclaimed when the sundae was put in front of him.

Pakhet just gave a faint smile. She was still unsure what to make of the boy. After all she still did not know for sure, whether he really was as young as he looked and acted. Considering he was able to change his appearance at will, she could not know for sure. But she still could not shake it that something about him really was childlike. Not that she normally spent a lot of time with children or youngsters. Maybe that was, why this felt kind of weird. Heck, until recently she had never hung out with anybody but Robert. First Heidenstein and now this boy.

So while Murphy started to eat the ice cream, as well as the strawberries on top with maybe a bit too much enthusiasm, she slowly spooned that one scoop of vanilla ice cream out of her coffee.

"By the way, have I even thanked you properly?", he asked while scrapping the last bit out of the ice cream bowl.

Sipping on the cold coffee she looked over to him. "For what?"

"For switching places with me", he replied.

Pakhet shrugged. "You were right. Without you talking them into having the doc take both me and that boy, we probably would not have gotten everything that easily. And yeah, the big guy would have probably killed you." She shot him a smug grin.

"Still", he replied. "Thank you. I mean, that was really courageous, you know? Really, for a moment I thought Crash really had killed you."

"I am not that fragile, you know", she said.

"I've seen that." The boy grinned at her. "But really, thank you."

Once more Pakhet just shrugged and took another sip of the coffee. When he would

not stop looking at her, she sighed. "You are welcome."

This seemed to content him as he went to scrapping out the bowl again. "And thank you for the ice cream, by the way. This is really good."

"Well, I promised, right?", she muttered with a sigh and looked at her commlink for a moment to see whether she had any new messages. After all she did not see it above Heidenstein to just write to make sure she had not crashed her car into another house.

"Are you waiting for something?", Murphy asked.

"Not really", she replied. "Just checking for messages."

The boy gave her a weird look, still a smile on his face. "So there is nowhere you need to be today?"

"No. Not really", she said. "Why?"

"Ah, nothing. Just wanted to know whether you are free for the rest of the day", he answered with a rather self-confident smile.

For a moment she raised an eyebrow, as she could not shake the feeling that he wanted to tell her something, but then she shrugged it off. "Yeah, for the most part I am free."

"Do you maybe want to go somewhere later on", he muttered, before putting the spoon with the last scraps he had been able to salvage in the mouth.

Pakhet sighed. She had not planned on spending the rest of the day with the boy. After all she did not even knew about what she was supposed to talk with him – in the end he was just a kid. Still, she did not want to give him the boot like that, which why she replied: "What do you suggest?"

Now it was the elf boy who shrugged. "I don't know. A bar maybe?"

"Aren't you a bit young for that?", she asked.

"I don't have to", he replied and switched his eye colour to green just to make a point. "Really, what would you suggest?"

Slowly but surely the situation started to feel awkward. But Pakhet at least tried to be nice. "I just don't want to corrupt the youth, you know?"

Murphy chuckled. "Oh, there is nothing more to corrupt here." He gave broad grin. "You can be sure of that. So no need to hold back."

Okay, something was weird about the boy right now. "That's what you say."

"Yeah, what I say. But look at me! Could this eyes lie to you?", he replied and gave her a suggestive look with his now green eyes.

And there was something about this look that made her feel even more uncomfortable. He was not trying to flirt with her, was he? Nah, that could not be – could it? "I am pretty sure they can", she answered him dryly.

"You hurt me", he protested and tried to look serious for a moment, but failed. Once again he gave a chuckle and then smiled. "Well, I don't know. We also could go somewhere else." For a moment he seemed to think, before giving another very suggestive look. "What do you suggest."

Okay, maybe she had been right in the first place. She gazed at him in disbelief. "Murphy... Are you trying to flirt with me?"

His smile became brash for a moment, before broadening again. "I am. Why? Is it working."

Pakhet drew a long breath. She could not believe him. What had given the boy this idea? Was he really serious? Well, apparently he was. And Pakhet was really not sure how to react to this. Of course she had rebuffed some guys before – but normally those were too drunk guys in their twenties or thirties. Not teenagers. Another long breath, then a sigh. "Murphy... How old exactly are you?", she finally asked.

He grinned. "However old you want me to be."

Ouch, that phrase had been old when she was born. "You are like what? Sixteen? Seventeen?" At least that was, what he looked and acted like.

Murphy did not reply but rather gave another look of his, which actually told her more than he might have considered. After all it just seemed as if he, while not wanting to reply directly, also did not want to actually lie to her.

She gave another sigh. "Listen, *kid*", she said putting a hard emphasis on the later word. "For all intents and purposes I could be *your mother*."

Once more he grinned. "But you are not."

"That's besides the point!", she replied with some annoyance.

Not it was Murphy who sighed. "Well, too bad. I just thought you were more... Pragmatic."

"This has nothing to do with pragmatism either", she said quietly. "You are just *too young* for me. I just don't go for kids." Not to speak about her rule to not start anything with another shadowrunner. She wanted to stick at least to that, after she had already violated the "don't make friends" rule too much. "Sorry, kid."

For a moment he actually looked a bit disappointed, but then he pulled himself

together and managed a smile. "It's okay." Slowly the smile broadened. "It was worth a try."

Geez, he regained his composure rather quickly. She actually felt a bit sorry for him still.

"The ice cream is still on you?", he finally asked.

She, too, gave a faint smile. "Of course."