

# Machines

## Hamburg in the shadows

Von Alaiya

### 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

Baramus 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 of 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.