

Machines

Hamburg in the shadows

Von Alaiya

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 was 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 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 cross 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 firering 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 thorn 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 though 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 charge. 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."