

Machines

Hamburg in the shadows

Von Alaiya

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 were 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 rip 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 than 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 have 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."