

Machines

Hamburg in the shadows

Von Alaiya

XXII – Normality

[JUSTIFY]“No Heidenstein around this time?”, Robert asked, when she came into his office.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“I'm sorry”, she said with a sigh. “I've been... Pretty busy, lately.”[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Robert looked at her as if he was not sure whether he should be angry or not. “Busy, eh?”[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“Yep, busy”, she replied. “For once there is some work again and... Well, I also spent a lot of time repairing cars and drones...”[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“At the hospital?”, Robert asked.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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?”[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“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.”[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Robert acted as if it was a tough decision, but then he smiled. “Well, I guess that will do. For now.”[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Pakhet smiled back. “Then I'll wait here for you?”[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"If you want to." He nodded.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]She gave him a poised smile. "That's why I've made the reservation at eight o'clock."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"Clever girl", he said with a smile. "Well, I take it that you'll come along."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"That was my plan", she replied. "We can take the Jackrabbit later on."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"Indeed."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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?"[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]He turned around. "New car?"[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"Yep, Ford America. I'll probably bring it over once I've the money for some upgrades", she said.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Meanwhile Robert finally had decided for a pullover. Once he had put it on he turned around to her. "Sure about that?"[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"Yes", she replied. "Why?"[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"Well, now that your dear doc has the tools...", Robert muttered before choosing a pair of trousers.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Pakhet could not help but to give a deep sigh. "Don't tell me you are jealous."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"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."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"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?"[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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?[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Robert seemed to notice that he had taken a step to far. "I am sorry", he said. "I did not want to offend you."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"It's okay", she replied with a sigh.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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?"[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Pakhet nodded. "Okay."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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?"[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"No, not really", she replied and raised an eyebrow. "Why?"[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"You know the *Elbschule Meiers*?", he asked.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Pakhet thought about this for a few seconds. "That super fancy boating school?"[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"Yep, that one", Robert replied.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Okay, intriguing. "So what about it?"[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"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."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"So you are going?", he asked.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"I think so", she replied. "Thanks."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]He shrugged and sent her the coupon. "You are welcome."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY] [/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Instead of his usual “Yes? Heidenstein here” he picked up with the words “Pakhet? Everything alright?”[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“Everything is fine”, Pakhet replied and could not help but to smile.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“Good”, he sighed.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“I just had a question for you, Doc”, she answered and then added: “And I hope I did not wake you?”[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“No, of course you didn't”, he replied.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“So, what's the question?”, he asked after a second of silence.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“Well, I am thinking about taking a boating class next week and wondered whether you'd like to come along?”, she asked.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Heidenstein was silent for a moment. “Sure, why not?”[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“Good”, Pakhet replied.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“When does it start?”, he asked.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“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?”[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“Which boating school?”[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“*Elbschule Meiers*”, she said.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Once again a moment of silence. “You know that they'll check the SINs, right?”[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.”[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“Okay... I'll probably get myself a better SIN for that”, Heidenstein muttered.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]“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.”[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"Good night", he replied with some humour in his voice.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]She smiled. "Once I am home."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY] [/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Still she could not help but to give a smirk when she saw it. "So, your new SIN, eh?", she asked with the grin.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"Yep", he replied. "Thought with their checks on the SINS this might be a good idea."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]But then again: It was unlikely. So she brushed that concern aside.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Heidenstein nodded and went ahead, while she still grinned to herself, about what she had just found out.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"So, I see you two tomorrow again, right?", he asked, when they were about to leave.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"Yes", Pakhet replied. "I've made appointments for the rest of the week and have already paid the money."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"Oh, very good", the teacher asked. "Though I cannot help but wonder: Have you any reason to be so hasty in taking this course?"[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"No", she replied quickly. "It just so happened that I had already taken a week off so..."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"But what about you, Mr. Anderson? Don't you have to work?", the teacher asked.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"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."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Mühlsteiner smiled. "Ah, it must be hard to work night shifts."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]But Heidenstein just shook his head. "One gets used to it", he replied.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"Well, then I see you two tomorrow", the teacher said and let them out.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"So, you consider security not as useful?", Heidenstein replied.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]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.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Once again he seemed to be amused. "Well, now imagine someone like Dacart in such a lesson. Would he look it up?"[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]Pakhet gave a long sigh. "Of course not. But with him the boat would explode anyway."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"See?" Heidenstein chuckled.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]She just gave a shrug before hesitating a moment. "So, Mr. Anderson, what do you say about us grabbing something to eat?"[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"Anderson?", he asked.[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"Your SIN?", she replied with a smirk. "The name."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY]"Ah, of course", he said with a faint smile. "Well, yes, we can get something to eat."[/JUSTIFY]

[JUSTIFY] [/JUSTIFY]