

Buckshot beat holes in the brick wall behind me. What didn't stick bounced off in a shower of flattened lead coins. I hugged the concrete barrier that was my castle wall. The damp stink of garbage and mold was suspended in the humid post-rainstorm air. Across from me, I could see Vincy in his muddy, wet clothes reloading his pistol. The deal had gone bad, and here we were in the dead end of the alley about to live up to the irony of the language.

My knuckles were busted up and my fingers and knees ached. My chest heaved under my Kevlar vest, which had already caught more than a few pellets of shot through my coat. I was wondering if my ribs were broken, but since I had to wonder, they likely weren't. Spit and foam fell from my lips and teeth.

All at once everything went silent and through the ringing I thought I heard the soft sound of oiled steel. Vincy and I made eye contact. We both stood up. The revolver jammed against the meat of my palm like it had many times before. My wrist was braced against it. Soon it was empty. A rusty shotgun and a warm body clacked against the muddy asphalt. Another animal yipped as he landed on his back with a new freeway through his stomach.

We grabbed the money and the chemicals. It was supposed to be an even deal, a proper trade, but they went all in and we came out on top. The car was around the corner, just where we'd left it. My heart was still pounding and my nose bled.

"I'll be picking sand out of my fur all night," Vincy moaned.

"Yeah. Those two were lucky, they get to have a coroner do it," I spat back.

Our boss met us under the overpass by the river. Her big polished eyes looked almost hungry when she opened the suitcase full of military stimulants. Her plastic face very nearly drew into a grin. We'd be getting a hazard bonus for sure. The two cases disappeared into her black car and the last I saw of her for the night was her dress peeking out from her overcoat and her plastic legs disappearing

behind an automobile door. Our driver changed vehicles. Vincy got back into his car, the one we'd used for the getaway, and drove away.

I reached into my coat pocket and found that a one-third inch lead ball decided to go right through my pack of smokes. I managed to fish a couple bent cigarettes out of it and threw the ruptured mess on the ground. My lighter was intact, but low on butane like I was low on food. I had to hold a hole in the cigarette closed while I lit it. I was cold and wet and stinking of stale wet dog before I got home to my stuffy apartment.

One bottle turned into another and the morning bled together until I woke up shivering in the shower, still wearing my socks and shirt. I was clutching a sudsy bottle of beer that I had spilled half of on myself and filled back up with shampoo. I was still swimming and just managed to crawl out onto the floor before I passed out again.

I had left this city years ago. I did a little work in Chicago, a little work here, a little work there. I bounced around the Great Lakes for a while, helping the local PDs, providing training. Several years ago, I thought I retired cleanly. I came back to Grey Anchor City for a man from my glory days.

Jeff Decouier was a man I never knew I loved until it was too late, as was often the case. Our professional lives in the Greater Anchor Metropolitan PD left us unable to openly pursue any sort of relationship. I had been greatly hurt when the man married some broad later on without so much as a word to me, but twenty five years had passed and the marriage had run its course. Decouier contacted me, and like a stray who'd been fed once, I came running back.

The morning I was supposed to meet him, he wasn't there. I was greatly disappointed. I was burned up like all my smokes and I took a walk around the block. I caught a movie, showed up at an old bar, then pissed the night away in my apartment just outside Skyscraper Harbor. The next day I was contacted by the police.

“Mister Van Grantze?” The officer was a short girl with short hair. She wore sports deodorant. I didn’t want to judge, but I got the impression she probably didn’t show up to play fetch with an old dog.

“That’s me.”

“Do you know a Mister Jeff Decouier?”

My heart sank. I demanded to know what happened. They said it was a suicide. I ended up in his claustrophobic apartment some time later, after pushing past the yellow tape and the open door. The place was sweaty and stacked with paper files in cardboard boxes. His fridge was empty. There was a clean rectangle in the dust on his desk. The place was all one room and in the corner there was a stained mattress, and above it, a messy brown hole in the wall. I’d seen a lot like it, but actually knowing that those chunks were part of a man I once knew?

I chewed a mint to keep my stomach. The files were nonsensical. They looked like a lot of cases of his old cases, dossiers of cartel and mafia leaders as well as some of our old comrades. It certainly looked to me like he’d let it all eat him up, all the death. I had been lucky. I’d closed my career fairly well. I’d kicked my drug habit and cut my drinking back and started eating healthy and working out. Jeff’s apartment was as devoid of life as his empty liquor and pill bottles were of product.

As I turned around to leave, there was some red-furred fellow with sharp ears and a pistol the size of his head shoved up under my snout blocking my way.

“You’re not a cop,” he asserted. The metal of the rectangular silencer was warm. His jacket was open. His body armor was bulky underneath.

“I was.”

“Why are you here?”

“Knew the guy who lived here. Old friend.”

The fox's eyes narrowed. Too much more and they'd be closed. I thought about trying something, but I wasn't feeling particularly hard despite his lovely cologne. I also didn't feel like having my brains lining another hole in the wall. Jeff could keep the monopoly on that for now. If I had my way the fox would be joining him, but I'd been slacking off on my Krav Maga since I hit the big Five O.

"Go into the bathroom."

"Nah, just went." I felt proud of myself for that until I felt serrated steel whip across the side of my nose. I winced and raised my fists but he caught one and was behind me before I could realize I was on the ground.

I woke up tied to a chair and aching and cold. The blood crusted up on my fur tugged it when I moved my face to wince. It was the standard interrogation deal. That fox shined a bright light in my face, shouted questions, punched me and whacked me and had a great old time. He chipped some of my teeth and I spat blood onto his fresh white shirt. All in all, it was a wonderful first date.

Eventually, when both of us were panting and had traded plenty of spit from longer ranges than I preferred, his boss came in. I didn't know at the time that she'd end up being my boss as well. She was a doll. Her dress was elegant and clung tightly. Her curves were perfect. She whirled with every click of her heels on the concrete floor. Her big, round, dead eyes told me nothing about what she'd end up doing to me.

She leaned in close and I could see her shiny teeth. Her jaw opened just a bit. Her hat's edges glowed like a halo. I could tell where every plastic plate on her body ended and where the other began. Her voice was tinny when she talked. She had no breath.

"You knew Mister Decouier?"

"Worked with him back in the day."

"I see." She stood up. She turned away. She pulled a smoke out of her coat. It was a long thing, wrapped in delicate paper with perfect lines and a subtle print of pink flowers. She put it in my lips. She lit it, and I took a deep drag.

"Describe it to me. The cigarette. Tell me how it feels."

I took another drag and blew the smoke out my nose. "It's good."

Her hand clacked when she flung it across my face. It stung. She picked up the cigarette and put it back in my mouth. "Articulate, Mister Van Grantze."

I took a moment to taste it this time. "Fragrant. It's very gentle. Smooth. It kind of has a flowery taste."

"Good."

That fox from earlier brought in another chair. She sat down across from me. She let me finish the smoke. She asked me every step of the way about it. I told her it was hot in my lungs. It burned my busted lip. When it was done, she took the butt from my lip and tossed it out of the small cone of light my world consisted of for the last hour.

The fox showed her my wallet. She looked through it, asked me about old pictures I had kept in there, about cracked rewards cards for stores that weren't around anymore, and about the card for the Fraternal Order of Grey Anchor Metro Police. I didn't volunteer any more information than was necessary. She put everything back in exactly where she'd got it from, closed it, and handed it back. She asked me what I knew about Jeff Decouier.

"We worked together."

"That's all? Your texts seemed to suggest more, Mister Van Grantze."

She was right. We'd gotten pretty open late at night, probably just as drunk as one another. We talked about a lot of things that wouldn't have been professional. There were some compromising photos sent. If she had seen Jeff's phone, she'd seen me naked.

"I can only assume that's why you were there. The loss of an old flame is hard on a heart. You see, Mister Decouier was an associate of mine, freelance, off the record. He had information and experience and contacts I so desperately needed for my business. He helped me, a lot. Mister Van Grantze," she paused. She looked at me with those big glass eyes. Her hair fell forward around her face in a way that made her look pitiable, like she was genuinely begging me. "Mister Decouier did not commit suicide."

I winced. "He was murdered?"

"I can help you find who did it."

"Why?"

"Because I'm generous. Because it's the right thing to do. Because, maybe, I have a stake in it." She stood up and moved out of the light for a moment. She came back with a folder, which she threw on the ground in front of me. "I have a list of names of the people who Mister Decouier was working for. Vincy?"

My bonds were released. I fell forward onto my knees. I didn't even try to fight that fox, I just groped for the file and opened it. Photos. These were all surveillance photos, some from security footage, some from cellphones, some from what must have been a very nice camera with a good long-distance lens. I didn't recognize most of them. The ones I did, I knew...

"The mob? Why would he be involved with these assholes?"

"Money, probably."

"We tried to put these guys away."

"Of course it seemed that way. He was good at his job."

I woke up in my bathtub some time the next morning, judging by the color of the window. The water was running cold and I was still wearing my shirt. I turned off the water and shook off and shivered by the heater until I could move right again.

It'd been three or four weeks since I got turned loose from that old synth's basement. I'd been doing odd jobs with her lackey, Vincy, since then. I was really in a messy way. I'd been hitting the bottle hard since I found out. It'd been a blur of cheap liquor and box wine between shootouts and migraines. My chest was tender where I'd taken more lead than a doctor would recommend. My vest was torn up and needed to be replaced. The plate looked like it was holding well, but that didn't mean I was.

My fur was matted. I'd been letting my grooming slip. There was mud, there were tangles. I spent the better part of a day just brushing after a long bout of self-abuse. I wasn't much in the mood to take another shower, since I'd apparently taken a few while I was blacked out, but I felt fresher. I felt alive again for the first time in days. A glass of water and three aspirin disappeared before I thought about stomach issues, but the pain relief now was worth the risk. When I could finally lift my arms above my head without wincing too much, I put on my pants and coat and went out.

I tried to eat breakfast for lunch at a shiny faux-retro diner and just ended up carrying the box around in the park for an hour. I had to remind myself that the world wasn't all this garbage I'd been neck-deep in. There were people out here, living their lives, playing with their kids, going on jogs in tight synthetic shorts. I must have looked like a bum, because a few folks took the long way around, and a few parents pulled their kids more hurriedly along when they looked at me. The thanks I got. At least the air was fresher today.

I was dozing off when my phone rang. I wasn't awake until I heard the voice of that synth on the other end of the line, distorted even more by the phone.

"I have a lead for you, Mister Fran."

“What?” I was shivering again. The sun had gone under while I passed out on the bench. How long had I been out?

“A lead. Have you been drinking?”

“Napping.”

“Well, I’d normally let a sleeping dog lie, but this is something you’d like to know. It’s about Mister Decouier.”

“Tell me.”

“He had contact with a certain person who I had previously worked with, a certain mover of materials. This was the last person to have talked to him before he was murdered.”

“How did you find this out?”

“Don’t you trust me, Mister Fran?”

I bit my lip. “No, but I don’t have a choice. You’re not just giving me this, are you?”

“Are you insinuating that I’m incapable of altruism? You’ve been trustworthy so far, and I’m trusting you with this task. But, no. This Mover, he’s been working with one of my rivals, and prioritizing them over me. You go in, bust up his operation, and you can do whatever you want to do to him to learn what he knows.”

I nodded. Then I remembered that I was on the phone. “Quid pro quo.”

“That’s how business works, Mister Fran.”

“Miss Songdog,” I spoke in greeting. The synthetic opened her arms to pull me into a hug. Her plastic muzzle kissed each of my cheeks in turn. Her perfumed smell was strong, but couldn’t overcome the musty neglect of this dark planning room. There was a hobbled table in the center, with a lamp perched upon it, and all around were rusty file cabinets and stacks of chairs. Vincy was complying with Miss Songdog and I was left to take my own seat.

Skyscraper Harbor was an ecological disaster, an old part of town full of disused buildings and flooded basements and crumbling infrastructure. There were a few businesses left open, but things like the old theater and the park were left wasting, and several buildings were condemned and hadn't been knocked down. It was the prime place to set up shop for the resident crime element, and had all the comforts of home.

That's where Vincy and I were headed. Miss Songdog's mover had a small operation there, where bootleg cybernetics would be brought in under darkness by boat and stored in a condemned high rise until they could be moved.

I couldn't take my eyes off the old model synthetic's glassy eyes. They twitched and darted as lively as mine, but it was unsettling how I knew they were turned by plastic and computer code. The way she moved was easy and smooth. I could tell she'd been living in that plastic carcass for a good long while, and likely had a good physical therapy routine. A model like that hadn't been on the market in ages.

Back then, people just didn't get full body augs. It was solid, but unpopular technology and even these days folks still seemed to prefer replacing only what was needed when it was needed. The extravagance and cost of the hardware rocketed ever higher, and so did the price of the expertise. The depth of Miss Songdog's pockets, if there was any left after her operation, was anyone's guess.

Today she was wearing a red floral print dress with a long khaki coat over it. The shiny ringlets of her blond wig hung down around her neck in a manner I hadn't seen in years. She threw a stack of photos on the table of our target, and photos of a boarded up department store. That was his makeshift warehouse, just a five minute ride from the beachfront. He was some sort of feline. I didn't pay attention to his name. It didn't matter enough to stick around in my head, or maybe I got that drunk after the messy way it played out.

It took us fifteen minutes to reach the place. It was quiet outside, and the moody sea wind threw dust in our eyes as we walked from three blocks away right up to the storefront and around the side into the alley.

It was dingy and the edges of the rough asphalt were covered in sand. There were stacks and stacks of trash bags and some shredded tires along the way. The overhead lights were busted out in their steel cages. My palm felt for the cold, familiar comfort of the butt of my revolver. I felt the fur on the back of my neck stand up and I curled up my lips. It was tense. It wouldn't be hard for us to get dropped on. We came to the edge of our desired building, where the alley turned and became wider to accommodate a delivery truck in the back docks.

It was still quiet. I didn't see a soul when I leaned out from the corner. I slipped out and could hear that fox behind me. This would have been a great place for him to stick the barrel of his gun against the back of my head and pull the trigger. If he had orders to, or even if he just wanted to, I'd be dead in the cold and not found for weeks or months. No one would know or care.

He didn't. That would've been too easy. Instead we made it to the small door beside the large garage doors that must've lead into the stock room of the store. It was rusty and the paint was flaking off. It also opened for me when I turned the knob. This Mover didn't seem to take to locking his doors, but the deep bark I heard as soon as I let myself in told me that he wasn't lacking on security.

A steel rack jammed up into my ribs and I couldn't catch myself. Sprawled out on the floor, I tried to roll away but smashed my head against the foot of the shelving I'd just bounced off. I felt a large hand grab the back of my shirt and hoist me up, then all at once drop me. A hot piece of metal landed on me and my ears rang. Vincy had killed my assailant.

I didn't feel much like thanking him when he pulled me up without any ceremony. Another man came around the corner to investigate the gunshot sound and to make one of his own. By now I had my revolver out, and I instinctually returned fire. I winced against the blinding sparks from its short barrel.

The room came alive. Every echoing shot was blinding to the shooter and the target. I ended up kissing the ground more than I'd like. I'd separated from Vincy. I slipped into a small lockup where the door had been busted off. I didn't have any illusions of the paperthin walls stopping any bullets, but the temporary concealment it offered me while I shook the spent cases from my gun was invaluable. I couldn't believe this place was swarming. The orchestra of firearms and screaming filled my head up and pushed all but the jagged edges of thought out. I took a deep breath.

A body came in and it wasn't Vincy. That's all I needed to know. I saw the small dark bore of a rifle and grabbed ahold of it. It jumped in my hand and burned but the bullet blew by me. I pulled myself up to the man and dragged my steel across his nose. Hot blood spurted onto me and he fell and I fell on top of him. I shoved the gun against something soft. I pulled the trigger and got spatter in my eye. I ripped the rifle from his grip and turned it around and went out into the room, all while hoping the thing had enough ammo left in it to be useful to me.

I swung it at a loud flash from around a crate and pulled the trigger a few times. The wood burst apart. I kept moving. I pushed towards a light in the darkness. It was an office. The door was unlatched. I kicked it down and busted into the room. A hand grabbed my rifle and I dropped it and lunged. I was on top of a man with my hands around a cat's throat. Synth's target. I slammed my knee against his body until he was a groaning mess, and then pulled him up with me. I was aching all over, panting and drooling. I couldn't hear anything but the constant drone in my ears and all I could smell was blood and burnt powder. I wasn't sure if the racket outside had died down or if I was just that deaf by now.

He started to beg. Apparently I could still hear, but just barely. He was holding on tight to my arm as I pushed him up against the wall.

"Decouier! Ex cop! You knew him!" I wasn't really asking a question. My mouth was dry.

"Who?" he screamed. I shook him.

“Decouier! He was an informant. Who killed him?”

His yellow eyes lit up. “H-he killed himself!”

I slammed my aching fist against his cheek. I’d be feeling that in the morning. He likely wouldn’t be.

His eyes darted over my shoulder. I didn’t know what he was looking at. “Okay, okay! Shit! Jeff, he was a friend! We traded info! Last I heard from him he was asking about what the Koreans were doing. I swear to god I told him everything I knew, but he was digging deep. He said he was asking for-“

A sharp, loud sound. Hot gas singed my fur and blood splattered onto my face again. The cat’s face collapsed and one of his eyes was hanging out and his body went limp. Vincy was standing beside me with a recoiling gun, like I was seeing everything in slow motion.