

I let go and the cat dropped from my arms. What was left of his head splattered. I grabbed the gun and pushed it to the side and raised my fist. That damn fox didn't flinch. His face and sweater were covered in flecks of blood, but none of it was his. His pupils were dilated. I wanted to knock his shining white teeth out.

"Oops, finger slipped," he wheezed.

I turned away. My adrenaline rush was wearing off. My hands were shaking. My stomach was roiling. I went to brush my fur out of my face but my hand came back wet with blood. I only smeared the gore in deeper.

"Come on, Poods," he said as he pulled the wallet out of the man's pants. He thumbed through it for whatever meager amount of paper money it might carry. He threw it down on the ground.

"That cat was about to spill his guts."

"He didn't have any to spill. Cops are gonna be on their way. I don't think now's the time for a reunion."

He was right. I gritted my teeth and pushed myself back up. The room was clear. There were maybe half a dozen men we'd killed. We'd gotten the drop on all of them.

Outside in the cold, fresh air I was shivering. We managed to make it back to the getaway car without attracting any attention. I could hear those familiar sirens as we went off. It was a silent ride back to the Synth's.

I couldn't understand why he'd have done that. I had the situation handled. It was there, in my fingers, and it slipped through my grasp like cigarette smoke. The name of the man who killed Jeff Decouier was just on the edge of my consciousness. That night I had feverish nightmares of that housecat's face, his mouth about to twist around the syllables, just as pulpy blood poured out. Vincy's grin haunted me. He had to know something.

I woke up shaking. I hadn't eaten in... Well. Time was slipping. I didn't rightly know how long I drifted out. I tried to recall what happened after we got to Synth's place. She asked if everything went smoothly. I told her it had. I collected a change of clothes. I got home. I showered again. I rubbed hydrogen peroxide into the stains. I hung it all up to dry. I went to sleep, or as close as I could get. Payment was slated to hit my business account soon, she'd said before we left.

I opened the fridge and there was nothing but leftover fried chicken. It was soggy, but I ate it and washed it down with a can of coke. I waited for the shaking to subside before I drifted off to sleep on a numb tide of whiskey.

A day later I was at the Songdog's residence. Vincy's car was not there. I'd been mulling it over this whole time, and decided that she was my only lifeline in this. I knocked, and I heard shuffling. The door opened. A literal bear greeted me who was as tall and strong as the building he was standing in. He was better looking than me, and better dressed to boot. I told him I was there to see Miss Songdog. He begrudgingly let me through.

Up the musty stairs a door opened and she leaned out. Her big glossy eyes were bright in the murky darkness. She waved me up.

As I walked into her apartment I was assaulted with the smells of vintage perfumes and scented candles. They mixed curiously with the neglected basement-smell from the hallway and the dust in

here. The walls were covered in wallpaper that came into fashion about forty years prior. It was faded in some spots, and still preserved in darker corners, and bore its gentle country floral pattern like a reminder of my childhood.

Miss Songdog motioned to a loveseat, and I took my place upon it. The cushions were a little flat, but it sure beat standing around like a butler. She eased her plastic body into a recliner set to the side of the couch, near the window where light from a digital billboard outside poured in through the quiet, homely dark. The blinds cast striped onto her back and the edges of her dress.

"To what do I owe the honor, Mister Fran?" She crossed her legs and rested her chin on her fist with a clacking noise.

"I have a concern about..." I hesitated. She leaned in. Now or never. "Well, about Vincy."

Her glass eyes rolled down and to the side, then snapped back up to keep me right where I was. "Vincy." Her voice took on a tone. "Vincy is a class act, isn't he?"

"He killed the Mover, right as I got him to squeal." I averted my eyes. The sight flashed before me again. Typically, I'd arrive late to that sort of party to investigate before the cleaning crews arrived. Sure, I'd shot dead too many poor souls in my line of work, but that was seldom done so close and so suddenly and so easily.

"I see." She was matter-of-fact. Her voice was flat as could be. Her half-lidded eyes showed no real emotion. "Mister Vince may be up to something."

My eyes caught on hers. She leaned forward and pressed her feet on the floor. Her hands grabbed the armrests of her chair. Her eyes opened wider. They were set in round holes that were too big and might have elicited a cartoonish whimsy once, but now were dated and disturbing.

"Mister Vince is not trustworthy, but he is dangerous and useful. Let's try to wring as much as we can out of the poor soul. As long as I can pay him enough, he won't likely turn on us. Oh!"

She hopped out of her chair. I'd never seen her move like that. I leaned back in my seat as she crossed the room in three strides and pulled something off the mantle above her old television set. From a small ornate lockbox she drew a small plastic roll and brought it over to me. My eyes must have lit up with recognition, because she leaned in, her nose close to my ears, and I could hear the soft static of her radio as she spoke.

"You know what these are." She turned her head to look at them, and to wrap her fingers around my hand. They were as cool to the touch as the package of syringes I was holding. "Combat stimulants. This isn't your normal cocktail, or your overpriced designer drug. No, Mister Fran. These are military grade, clean as can be, uncut." She traced the edges of the thick, opaque plastic they resided in. I was trembling. "They might be past their expiration, but... They're my gift to you."

I tried to push them back into her hand. "I don't use these."

She cackled and pushed herself into my lap. She was heavy and dense. Her torso was warm, probably because of whatever was powering her. I could feel a slight vibration throughout her. "Don't be so modest. I've looked into your file, Mister Fran. These were a big ticket item, weren't they? I remember, around twenty, maybe twenty five years ago. My husband and I used to make a killing off these to our boys in blue."

I was so tired. I hadn't slept properly in days. My eyes were sunken and the dark circles might've made me look like a racist interpretation of a raccoon. I certainly didn't smell like flowers and sunshine. She didn't have a sense of smell, or taste, or a true sense of touch. Her knee depressed the

seat beside my thigh. Her chest didn't heave with breath, but mine did. My heart was beating fast. I was clean for over a decade and now here she was, this blonde-wigged mechanical temptress, holding up my card in a sick magic trick. I remembered how it felt. It used to be the fire in my veins, it made everything seem like it was moving slowly, but I was vibrating, and my tremulous hands clutched that shotgun and I kicked down the door and in slow motion night-vision I saw a shape holding up a glistening revolver and I pulled the trigger and—

"I can't, Miss Songdog," I croaked.

Her eyelids slid down. With just a tilt of her head her expression changed. With her snout pointed just slightly up, she looked like she was judging me, or, perhaps, slyly regarding me.

"Just hold onto them. They might come in handy." She straightened out her dress as she stepped back off of my lap. I was cold. I set the packet down on her coffee table. Maybe, I thought, I could get away with leaving it there, if I just played smooth and didn't acknowledge it.

"The Mover, he said something about the Koreans," I managed to remember. My head was swimming, it felt like. My face and ears were hot.

Miss Songdog put her thumb to her chin. She paced between her chair and the edge of the kitchen. "Koreans... Ah. That's something I happen to know about. They've been ramping up their importation, trying to increase their slice of the pie. I have a business meeting with one of the larger syndicates coming up soon. Maybe if you can accompany me, and if you don't make too big of a stink, you'll be able to find time to ask about Mister Decouier. I heard he had quite the relationship with them."

I thanked her. A few pleasantries later, she pushed her cold, firm nose to either of my cheeks and bid me farewell. I made for the door, but as I was about to close it, she grabbed my shoulder and halted me dead in my tracks.

"Mister Van Grantze, don't forget these," she crooned as she brushed up against me and slid the package into my jacket pocket. It slid into where I normally kept my smokes like an eager replacement, but they weighed on me like a heavy chain.

"Thank you, Miss Songdog."

"Time has had her way with you, Mister Van Grantze. You need every advantage you can take."

I knew she was right. Walking down that sidewalk, my whole body was still aching from the last job. The world all in gray swirled around me. If I'd just been a little slower, if I'd just made a small mistake, I'd have been dead. I reached for a smoke but there was only the Stims. I cursed and headed for the nearest corner store.

That day had been replaying in my head. The initial shot. The man with the rifle. I had barely been able to overpower him. If it had really come to a melee, I'd lose. It was apparent from the trembling in my hands as I fumbled with the change. I nodded to the cashier. There was a very impatient dog behind me, fidgeting. He must have needed his fix harder than me.

At the corner I stopped and peeled away the plastic and withdrew a slender cigarette. I was eager to light it when I heard a crash back in the store behind me. I peeked over my shoulder and the very impatient dog had pulled a flimsy-looking knife and pushed it against the cashier's throat. It would have been easy for me to call the police and walk away. Foiling petty robberies wasn't my job. I just wanted a damn smoke to clear my head.

Before I knew it, I was wiping sleep out of my eyes and pushing my way back into the corner store. The cashier's big gold eyes darted to me, then the dog turned and pointed the knife at me.

"Get outta here, old man!" he snarled. "This ain't none of your business!"

I raised my hands up to about shoulder level. I took a few more steps in. His ears were pinned, his tail was up against his leg. He was scared.

"Not another step!"

"Woah," I crooned, "I just wanted to grab a snack."

"Get the fuck out!"

"It's my diabetes. I really need something."

He cursed and reached his other arm forward to grab the front of my shirt. I let him, and then I grabbed his other hand. My palm slammed against his head. I almost lost grip of his knife-hand when he pulled and shoved it. He nearly cut me. I tangled my legs with his and shoved him down to the ground.

It was a mess. I was too tired and I felt like I was moving slow. Somehow he got on top of me and I was staring into his eyes as he tried to wrench the blade out from between us. He pulled his arm out and the flimsy, bent thing shone in the light. He tried to jab it under my chin, but I grabbed his hand again and shoved my elbow into the crook of his. He fell right on the thing and yapped.

I took the time to push him off me and scrambled to my feet. Cheap stale pastries littered the floor after I knocked down a rack. The dog pulled the blade out and tried to get up. I ran forward and kicked him. The knife went flying. He tried again and my boot slammed on his ribs. I felt my hip pop. I was almost foaming, and was wheezing. I wasn't meant for this hero shtick anymore.

I grabbed the back of the dog's jacket and kicked him again for good measure, and hauled his worthless pelt out the door and onto the street. I didn't even have a good witticism for the event. I turned to look back at the cashier. He'd just stood there the whole time, watching with his big kitten eyes and his twitching whiskers. I pointed a finger at him.

"You're lucky you're cute."

I hobbled away. My hip and my knee were on fire.

I needed to get a new hobby.

About a mile down the road I realized I should have bought a carton. A gently-lit woman asked me for a smoke from a dim alley. I obliged. It was a little chilly for the way she was dressed, with her sharp cropped jacket and her short skirt and leggings. Small blue lights on her shoulders framed her countenance gently. She was all made up like a doll and her eyes twitched back and forth a certain uncanny way, like the Songdog's, and the hand she barely held the cigarette in was glossy and jointed and accented in blue lights like on her jacket.

"Thanks, pops," she exhaled with the smoke.

"Those augs keep you warm?" I ask.

"Youth, maybe. Why? You wanna take me home and warm me up?"

I looked down. Oh. I realized her stiletto-heeled boots were jointed too, at the knee and ankle. That made sense.

"Oh come on, don't tell me you're..." She let the pause linger in the air as humid smoke curled around my ears. "...shy."

It's not all that often younger women hit on me. Sure, she was a working lady, but it'd be a bold-faced lie if I said I wasn't tickled somewhere in the ego over this. She almost made me forget that I was still stinging from kicking the snot out of that poor kid just a bit ago.

I'd ended up with a sympathy for her occupation from the kinds of cases I always ended up on. She spoke English with only the local accent, and didn't look foreign at all. She had probably just hit on hard times. Augs like that weren't cheap, but they were becoming more and more common and more and more overt. It was easy to imagine how such a thing could lead someone like her right to this alley and keep her there.

"I feel like hell, Miss, but it'd be a lie to say you aren't pretty."

"Thanks, pops, but compliments don't keep the lights on."

"I'd love to, but, I'd better go." The words slipped out before I could consciously deny her. It was just automatic. I was lonely, but I couldn't. It'd been a long time. I wasn't doing so great in Chicago on the dating scene, anyways, and that was months and months ago.

She slipped a small card into my jacket pocket. "Change your mind, that's my number. Ask for Cheri. Hope to see you around." She waved over her shoulder and disappeared around a corner before I could say another thing.

That was a close call. She could've sold a man like me a beachfront cabin in Arizona if she wanted. Instead I was home and undressed and alone again before I knew it. The reflections of streetlights off the passing cars cast ghostly strings of light through the blinds. I laid on the old, faded couch in my living room and flipped through the channels. There wasn't a whole lot to see, so I left it on an old crime movie.

Since I dredged myself out of bed I'd been hit on by two women, and I'd normally count that as a hell of a success. What wasn't, was that earlier in the week I had to throw out half of my shirts and undershirts and my favorite tie and scrub blood and brains out of my hair. In a twisted way, it filled me with nostalgia to no small degree.

I watched the Private Eye on the flatscreen run his claw down the Femme Fatale's chin. They were standing in an empty street in the rain and it turned all the colors into shifting shapes. I'd always admired the old gumshoe schtick, but my own career was far less glamorous. I never did go to the private sector. Once, I did have a femme fatale, but that was nearly two and a half decades ago. My colleagues, the ones that lived, mostly had settled down by then. They had wives, kids on the way, all that sort of thing, even back then. Now they all had grandkids and homes in Florida or Baltimore, boats and new cars.

I closed my eyes and dreamed of a woman I knew once. She was tall and leggy. She was married to some rich cokehead, but not scared of him. Once I bumped into the big bore revolver she kept under her pillow when we were busy. I met her during some investigation. The details escaped me. I still fancied myself a buck back then. I was forty, and she was about the same, and her younger husband was just about going through his midlife crisis, and I think I was having some sort of crisis of my own.

It didn't work out. I don't rightly know if her husband ever knew. Someone ended up offing him one day in broad daylight. A van pulled out of an intersection in front of his car and three men unloaded rifles into his fancy sports car. She ended up being hit, too, when a car bomb probably meant for him ended up getting under her. I sobbed for days.

The smiling face of the morning show host was the first thing I saw when I woke up. I was stiff and I had to shake the feeling back into my arm. It'd been a chilly night and all my joints ached. This wasn't a good start to the day, but I forced myself to swallow a couple pickled eggs and headed out.

Miss Songdog greeted me at her apartment door. She kissed my cheeks and wrapped me in her arms.

"Mister Fran, I'm so glad you're here early. I love a punctual man."

I nodded. "Thank you, Miss Songdog. When do we start?"

"Oh, you don't need to be so businesslike! We have another two hours. I was hoping we could have breakfast, get to know each other, all of that."

I raised an eyebrow. "Will Vincy be joining us?"

She turned her snout down to give me a look. "Are you kidding me? This type of business is far too delicate for Mister Vincent. No. He's taking care of something for me out of state."

That was quite a relief. I didn't know if I could see his face without busting my knuckles across it right now. Luckily, Miss Songdog seemed to be sympathetic.

She showed me to her kitchen, and fried two eggs and made a pot of noodles and threw in some bouillon. All in all, it took only a few minutes for her breakfast to come together, and we were sitting in her living room with a bowl of ramen each. I didn't take her for much of a cook and I was curious if she'd eat. Her painfully robotic body didn't seem like it'd have any option for that sort of thing at all. The whole time I slowly picked apart the dish, which was surprisingly good, she just held the blue-bordered white bowl as its contents grew cold.

I set my empty dish down. She leaned in and set hers down as well.

"No appetite?" I couldn't help but ask.

She jerked in a laugh. "Oh, Mister Fran, no! That would just make an unseemly mess."

I could see the speaker in the back of her mouth. It was all smooth in there but the teeth.

"Forgive me, I just.."

"I'll sate your curiosity. I said I wanted us to get to know each other, right? You've got the potential to be a far more viable business partner than Mister Vincent, bless his heart. You're far less rash, far more professional."

Normally, compliments from a crime boss weren't something I was eager for. In the back of my head I figured that she was trying to wrap me around her little finger. It was working. Her mannerisms reminded me of someone I knew, but I couldn't tell. I most certainly had never met someone wearing her model of full body prosthetic.

"I don't breathe, Mister Van Grantze. I don't taste. I don't feel hot or cold. I don't feel pain." She left her chair and invited herself onto the couch with me. She leaned forward and pushed her hand to my chest. My breath caught. The sound I made wasn't very masculine. "What I can feel is your heartbeat. I can see your eyes twitch. I can feel you breath."

"Miss Songdog, I—"

"Don't understand? I could get a new body, yes. A more advanced, top-of-the-line prosthetic body. One that can feel, one that has some semblance of taste, one that can blend in easier. Why don't I? It's because I need to remember, Mister Van Grantze, what was done to me."

There was a fire in her glass eyes that was partially my imagination and mostly her words. Her sculpted face never changed expression but she appeared intense. She was pushing herself onto me again, resting her weight against my chest.

"I'm sorry, Miss Songdog."

She put her hand on mine. I realized my hand was in the middle of her chest. She looked down at it, then back up to me with her smoldering green eyes. The soft 'hah' she uttered was soothing on my ears.

"You like more than just men, Mister Van Grantze?"

I chewed my lip for a moment. My tail pressed up against my leg as I looked away. "Does it matter?"

"You sure seem to like me. I bet you could be a real ladykiller."

"I was, back in the day." I hadn't pulled my hand away. Her shoe brushed against my pantleg.

"You are a handsome fellow. It's too bad you have to be so lonely. We should share a meal together more often."

"I didn't expect you to cook."

"Please. Because I'm a synth?"

"No, because—Yeah. Because you're a synth."

She chuckled. She had one of her legs across my lap, and both my hands were on her, now. Her plastic snout was pressed up against my own. Her nose pressed to my cheek, and mine to her. My heart was racing. My blood was pumping. My breath was hot and she was holding steady as a doll until she dragged her plastic claw under my chin from back to front. Her other hand began to tug my tie down, then unbutton my shirt.

I put my hands on her shoulders. "Do you do this to every man that kills for you?"

She put her palm on my chest and pressed me down. Her thin silicone pads tugged the fabric of my shirt. "If you like that kind of thing."

"I'm awfully sober to have sex with my boss."

She put a finger across my lips and shushed me. I couldn't lie. She might've been plastic and steel, but she was all woman and her dress was tight across her bosom. She tugged my shirt open and pulled my tank top untucked. I moved to slide the shoulder of her dress down, but she pushed my hand away.

She was in control. I didn't mind it.