

I adjusted my tie. My revolver sat snugly in the holster under my dress shirt, butt-forward, in the thin fabric underarm rig I'd used in undercover operations for the last ten years. I didn't anticipate leaving my coat behind, but this being a 'business' meeting, I figured deep concealment would be the name of the game.

Grey Anchor's Little Seoul was hit hard by the withdrawal of support from the larger tech companies. Riding down the old strip was like a neon museum run. Life was slowly returning as smaller ethnic businesses and locally-ran corner stores once again converted the skeletons of the startups that picked up and left.

That's not to say all of Little Seoul was turning back from neon to soft incandescent. Closer to the richer part of town, a few of the big offices and the biggest legitimate cybernetics showcase store in the city acted as a wall of light between the crash and the keep.

Soon Miss Songdog and I were in the elevator heading up. She was wearing a black satin dress and her plain trench coat over it. She was immaculate. I was a little rougher around the edges, but she didn't seem to mind.

I was still a little antsy from the morning's activities. That babe was really a tease. I never thought I'd end up that attached to plastic and steel, but there I was, still feeling like I was being led around on a leash. Unfortunately, that incomplete romp didn't help with my soreness at all, and I could tell that Miss Songdog's friends were noting the limp in my step and the way I chewed my lip a little.

These cats were all wearing identical suits and similar glasses. They were set up like the Secret Service with their wired earpieces and it didn't take my detective experience to deduce that they all had guns under their sport coats. We were walking right into the snake pit.

A large grey dog opened the door to a conference room for us. Miss Songdog thanked him he nodded back at her, but squinted at me as I passed by him. I just cocked an eyebrow. I hoped my smooth countenance would put them off. He didn't seem to be very impressed.

The conference room was standard. You had a large table, a projector, whiteboards, the whole shebang. The place had a wide-open window with a great view of the city. Some HR person thought putting potted plastic plants everywhere would increase morale. It didn't. It was still just all green and grey.

At the head of a table sat an old feline. She must have been my age. She was nearly dwarfed by the chair she was in and her thick glasses magnified her eyes. She didn't look out of place at all.

Synth sat down at the opposite end of the table and traded niceties. She asked about Mrs. Pak's children and grandchildren. They talked about how an actor they adored had recently passed. Tea was brought in and I was invited to partake. Just when this was looking like it was just going to be a social visit, papers were dropped out of nowhere and Synth leaned back in her chair. Mrs. Pak adjusted her glasses and straightened up. She beckoned one of the suited animals over and he leaned in close and she spoke to him in their native tongue.

Synth turned to me and nodded. "Mister Van Grantze, a moment of privacy, please?"

I relented. I stood up from my chair, pulled my pants up, and pushed the chair back in. I was let out the way I came in and Pak's enforcers followed me out. It was just those two in there, the plastic wild dog and the silver cat. They seemed to have got on like old friends until business was brought up. I realized I really had been among professionals.

Time passed. The morning was still hot on my mind. I turned to the dog. He scowled, but I talked anyway. He seemed like the man to ask.

"Have you ever heard of a man, ex-cop, his name was Jeff Decouier?"

The dog's scowl softened. Suddenly, we were starkly alone in the hallway. He hooked his index finger. "Come with me, we'll talk somewhere more private."

He turned down the hall and hooked into an adjoining corridor I hadn't noticed. We crossed an office space full of clacking keyboards and the noise of copy machines. There was another hall at the end, where we stopped by another large window. Clouds were starting to come in over the city and around the tops of the tallest high rises. The grey blanket dimmed the light in here and it all started to blend together.

"I assume you know of Mister Decouier's untimely death."

I nodded.

"Nobody really knows who might've done it, but he was a valuable asset."

"So I've heard."

"But everyone knows why. The man had very valuable information. No one knows who took it. No one really knows what exactly he had, just that it was valuable enough to kill him over."

I turned away. I looked out the window over the city as the clouds tucked it in for an early nightfall. Thunder rolled far away. The sea roiled where I could see it between the towers. The west sides of every bastion shone orange with the sun setting below the inland edge of the cloud bank.

"Did you know anything about him?"

"About Jeff? I knew a lot. We went way back."

"I see."

I heard something. A glint of light twinkled off the glass in a strange way. There was the soft rustling of clothing. I turned around just in time to see the big blocky end of a silencer.

"Perhaps you and I could take a trip down memory lane, then."

My heart skipped a beat. It was surprising how similar the feeling to getting a gun held on you was to asking someone out for the first time. Anticipation, anxiety, it all mixed together in a knot in my stomach that I knew too well.

I raised my hands and slowly turned around. He thought he was in control of the situation. He was, but I was getting ready to carpe his diem. Last thing I wanted was to end up in another basement, tied to another chair.

The fool held the gun right above my nose. My heart was racing. I was tense and hot under all my clothes and my plates. This was it.

I grabbed the silencer and pushed it up and jumped forward. The gun barely jerked. The sound was still loud. The crack in the window was immediate. I was on top of him beating his hand into the ground until he let go of the gun and got his mitts around my neck.

I didn't want to reach for my gun until I got off of him for a moment. I jammed my elbow into his face but I couldn't tell if it was hurting him any more than it was hurting me. He wasn't able to get a good grip on my neck but he was pulling on my mane. His lips were curled back and I could see all his dull teeth.

He was able to roll me over. I was able to turn and knee him right in the soft side of his stomach. I must've got somewhere squishy, because his breath left him and his eyes lost focus. I threw him off of me and pulled myself up the wall.

I popped open the front of my shirt and reached in and pulled my snubnose out while he crawled toward his gun. He froze. I limped over and kicked the gun out of his reach.

"We can do this all easy-like, or you can die," I told him. I really felt like the boss until one of the doors at the end of the hallway opened and three suited fellas with SMGs came in. They started shouting at me. I couldn't quite understand what they were saying, but it sure sounded a lot like they were telling me to bust through the nearest door and get the hell out of there, so I did.

They didn't much like that. Not-so-silenced gunfire filled the hallway and lead busted up the sterile near-white paint on the walls. I was in another conference room and knew they'd be coming along soon. These spinning office chairs wouldn't make a good stop for the door. I had to bust through the next and hope it led somewhere else.

They were crowding me like they were flies and I was a picnic next to a garbage can. There was really no good way through the office rooms. There was no true cover, only fleeting concealment, as their subsonic bullets tore through whatever obstacle they saw me move into. I ran right, and they were coming through the door. I jumped left, and there was another group that lit up the area. Bullets pounded my vest and knocked the wind out of me and I made a frail sound as I finally got myself to reverse directions and slid behind into a cubicle, firing blindly back the whole time.

I was huffing but I could hear their footsteps under the ringing in my ears. I patted my vest and could feel where the lucky rounds had embedded themselves into the material. It'd do no good if they got right up on me or I got unlucky and put one right in my skull. All I had was a revolver. This was looking like it was going to be the end. Hell, even if they did haul me away for questioning, I'd end up in the same place at the end of it as if they killed me here; sunk in a concrete foundation under a new parking garage.

Out of habit I patted my jacket pocket where my cigarettes normally sat, but this time there weren't any in there. There was a much heavier package. It was the combat stims. I'd never taken them out. Hastily I drew my pocket knife and sliced open the tape and plastic and withdrew a single needle. I unbuttoned my cuffs and rolled up my jacket and shirt sleeves above my elbow. The sting of the needle through my fur was hardly noticeable next to the fire in my ribs and knees.

I threw the thing down and held my bunched-up shirt sleeve over the drop of blood. I was about to be enveloped in fire. There was a good chance I'd die anyway. I reloaded my revolver quick as I could. I was starting to shake. My head was getting light. My heart was pounding even faster, beating on the bone-cage that held it in. My mouth slacked and I could feel it starting to get dry. Everything flowed away from me. There was just me in this heap in the cubicle, every inch of fur on me standing on end, my nose feeling like it was on fire, my skin electric. I pushed myself up onto my feet. The revolver was sure in my trembling hands. As I moved I felt the air sliding around me like the warm water of a pool. I stepped out into the hallway of cubicles.

A suit grabbed me, but I pulled the machinegun out of his hands and put my revolver against his head until I felt it in my wrist and squeezed the trigger. The back of his head fell away and stained the collar of his shirt. Three more men ran in slow motion. Their bullets whistled around me. I fired once.

One fell. I fired again. Another fell. The third blasted my chest. I winced. I watched the sparks fall out the end of the barrel of his gun but still killed him.

I heard shoes behind me and I pirouetted around. I blew the bullets off me with my breath and walked on soft air right up to them. Bam, another dead. Bam, the last. Click. Empty. He tried to swing the gun at me. I caught it. My boot hooked behind his leg. He fell onto his knees. I slammed the weighty snubnose against his skull. He made a daft sound as it crunched. I kept it up until he stopped moving.

I jammed the bloody pistol into the waist of my pants. I didn't notice the gore I smeared over my shirt. Heat dripped from my nose. The greys of the office were turning into loud blues. I pulled the fire alarm. Hopefully anyone not involved would get the hell out of this place. I was about to send it to a neon hell.

I flew. I picked up a dead man's gun. The plastic thing felt floaty in my hands, but it slung lead quickly and quietly. My head was big. My shoulders were slack. Sprinklers watered down my fur and the droplets ran down my back and chest, all chilly under my fur.

As untold time flew by me I made my way back to the hallway where I'd got into this mess. It was swarming. I yanked the trigger and laughed as a spook started when he saw me, covered in blood, bullet holes in my shirt, still standing. The hallway disintegrated around me as the barrel snapped from man to man, blasting a line up each. A round caught me in the leg and I went for a trip. All I needed was a split second to catch my breath. I was powerful. I was light. I was unburdened. These spooks had nothing on me and I ate every bullet they tossed me. I chewed on them and spat them out. The stark lights went out. There was only the soft window glow and the neon red exit sign left to reflect in the smears and puddles of blood and the misty showering sprinklers.

I pushed through the door, but there was no one there. The hallway was empty, and well lit. At the end was the conference room Miss Songdog and Mrs. Pak were in. I floated up to it. There was no sound. I took a deep breath. I threw open that door and jumped in.

Mrs. Pak was still sitting at the head of the table. No surprise ran over her aged face. Miss Songdog was still in her place with her cup of tea, now cold. They both had been laughing. Miss Songdog looked over her shoulder at me. She looked striking. Her eyes popped, her hair dazzled. It must have been the stim but I could see every detail, every bit of texture on her plastic sheathing, every twinkle in her mirror-polished eyes.

"Sorry, my old friend," she said to our gracious host as she stood up and collected herself, "But it looks like it's time to go. We simply must do this again someday. Ah, and, sorry about any damage."

Just like that, she excused herself as if I hadn't just killed near a dozen men. I dropped the machinegun on the floor and pulled my coat closed over my bloody shirt. Miss Songdog had the audacity to walk right out the front door with me. I thought I saw more of those suits, but no one harassed us at all.

It was a good thing, too. As soon as we were out in the crowd on the raining street, I took off. My stomach was roiling. Just inside the nearest alley I doubled over and landed on my bad leg in a muddy puddle. I lost my lunch, then dry heaved. Songdog casually strolled around to me. Her hand patted my back. I slumped against her leg. She crooned something kind to me while the shivers wracked my body. Eventually she got me back up, and back to her car. She drove us back to her safehouse. She took her time, and I was trying to impress upon her the fact that there was a hole in my

leg. She seemed fairly unconcerned. I didn't know if it was the stims or the blood loss that was making heady.

She parked right in front of her building and before I knew it she was hauling me out of the seat and onto the concrete. As soon as she pulled me up I felt dizzy and spat up a little. I tried my best but I couldn't quite keep up with her. She had to pull me up the stairs. Her fingers dug sharply into my ribs.

I thought she'd lay me on her couch, but instead I got pulled to her kitchen and she pushed me onto the floor. "Take off your pants," she told me just before she disappeared back around the corner. Normally, I'd love to hear anyone say that to me, but my boots were still tied on and when I tried to sit up to untie them, it felt like I was getting ran through the thigh with hot wires.

She came back holding a small case. I hadn't made any progress. She dropped the case and quickly worked my pants down.

"I was hoping for better circumstances for when this happened," I laughed. I tried to prop myself up but she just shoved me down. She pulled my knee up to look at the wound and I made a sound that wasn't very masculine.

"Looks like it went right through," she told me. I could feel hot blood pouring up my leg. She plugged either side of the wound with gauze and held my leg tight. "This isn't that bad."

"Ever been shot?" It just slipped out. She cocked her head.

"Of course. Lots of people have wanted to see me dead. A few of them got real close, too."

She pulled the soaked gauze away. I stayed there on the cold linoleum until she finally seemed to have staunched that wound. My entire side felt hot. I ended up naked and on the couch with a pillow in a plastic bag propping my leg up. She pulled the contents of my pockets and threw it all on the coffee table. Little did I know it, but I'd never see that shirt again.

She flicked a small syringe and stuck it in my arm. It was only moments before I felt the fire of the stim grow glowing edges. I began to slip off. I started to snore. She was on the phone. Things were going to be okay.

The Synth was holding my head in her lap when I woke up. Someone was fishing around in my leg. Vincy was holding it straight out. A third person, some mustachioed terrier in a flannel and blue gloves was fishing around in the bloody hole.

I sure made it hard, but the apparent surgeon got his work done remarkably fast. Or, more likely, I woke up at the end of it. He pulled off the gloves and wiped his face. He started speaking to Synth in some other language. I looked over to Vincy, who gave me raised eyebrows and a slip of pink tongue.

This wasn't the first time I'd gotten shot, so I knew what I was in for. I also knew that this man wasn't going to write me a prescription I could just fill at a pharmacy. His jacket rattled as he gestured. Synth almost looked like her immovable plastic face was smiling. Maybe it was the crossfading I still felt.

From his flannel the man pulled out two small bottles. The labels weren't in english. He tapped one, and said in a thick accent, "Pain killer." He tapped the other, and said, "Antibiotic."

I nodded. He seemed pleased. He left. I flickered out like a fluorescent light.