

Miss Songdog was out in the rainy night in her long blanket-lined coat and her wide flop hat. Both were incredibly soft. She couldn't feel it, but it must have lent her some kind of comfort. Her heels clicked on the asphalt and concrete.

The lights scattered on the ripples of the puddles and the wet texture of the road. The solitude was bizarre after the crowded club. The city street was as quiet as it could be. There was only the distant sound of motors on the highway and the soft brushing of wind through the trees. Neon and incandescent lights buzzed. It dulled the noise in her head for just a minute.

She walked and the people on the street didn't see her. She passed through the rain-slickened alleyways under the calming yellow lights. Once she got to the end of the street she'd be back to business and back to the numb truth. Sure, singing at the club made her 'the occasional singing robot', but it also made her feel like a woman. It tickled her ego. It made her feel like she could breathe again. Oh, to only take one more deep breath and leave a hearty sigh.

She could see Vincy from two blocks away. He wasn't subtle, with his red blazer and his pink shirt. He saw her, too. He had a cigarette lit for her by the time she got there, and she held it in her lips. His eyes shined as he took a long drag.

"Miss Songdog."

"Mister Vincy. How was the business trip?"

"Practically a vacation. The man from Reno assured us of his commitment to the contract."

"You're awfully chipper. I suppose he gave you a generous parting gift?"

"You could say that."

"Don't put it all up your nose at once."

He smiled. His tail flicked. She pulled the cigarette from her mouth and closed her eyes to pretend she could taste it. The splendor of relative silence prevailed for the moment. Her associate kept his fidgeting to himself. He chuckled. He scratched all over. She stood silent as the cigarette burned out close to where it was lit. She snuffed it on the concrete bannister. He hopped up and stretched. He turned and curtsied, and walked off into the night to terrorize the city streets.

There were always repercussions. She knew that Mrs. Pak wouldn't let that body count slide easily. Even if she was willing to, the rules of this business dictated some kind of payment. Even when life was cheap it was hard to agree on a price.

The burner phone rang sometime after sunset and Miss Songdog answered in a sweet voice. The person on the other line didn't seem to be in as high spirits. It was three minutes before she was at the busted-up pawn shop talking to the bent old dog that ran it.

"Mister Tanner," she began. She pulled a tin from her jacket, then a cigarette from the tin. She handed it to the man, who produced his own lighter.

"They smashed my fucking counter. My most expensive instruments. All trashed." He shook his head. He took a drag. Synth strolled into the place. The locks on the security shutters were cut. The windows were smashed. The glass counter full of jewelry was broken in. The store had been turned upside down. The shelves were tossed over.

"Did you see who?"

"Not really. Just that they all had track suits and motorcycles."

She eyed the mess. She pulled out a floral billfold and split it open. Fifteen crisp hundred dollar bills were extracted, counted, and handed to Mister Tanner.

"Consider this an up-front payment, Mister Tanner. Now, I want you to call the police and tell them you didn't see anything. Make this look formal as you can. File an insurance claim. Once that's taken care of I'll send a strong boy or two over to help you clean up. Sorry about this—" The phone rang again. She snapped her billfold shut.

It was Vincy. "Pawn-n-Loan on 34th just called. Place is being busted up. I'm on my way over." He hung up.

Miss Songdog turned to the shop owner. Mister Tanner smiled. She stepped over to a rack of sports equipment. She picked up one bat, and then another. She flipped them in her hand. She gave them some test swings. Finally she settled on a plain aluminum one.

"Do you mind if I borrow a little something?" She held the bat like it was a bouquet.

"You can keep it."

"Just tell us where the poodle is and we'll leave," the cat in the blue helmet said. He was twirling his knife. Another feline and a short dog were on either end of the counter. The shop owner was in the middle. He couldn't stand the waiting and now he was in over his head. There'd been a bit of a scuffle as he pushed his way into the building.

"I don't know who that is. Now I swear, when that crazy fox gets here, you're gonna wish you just left. You don't know who—"

A gloved hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him forward. The knife, warm from being in the cat's pocket all day, was shoved against his throat.

"Nobody's coming to save you. You think the old doll or the fox care about your worthless ass? That anybody does?"

"Fuck you."

A hollow sound preceded a scream when the cat picked up and slammed the owner's head against the glass. He demanded to know where the poodle was. This time there was no answer. He repeated the motion again and again. The counter shattered. The cat let the body slump back behind the counter.

"Next one, then?" one of his comrades asked. He nodded. They turned to leave.

Their motorcycles were sitting outside in a line. An engine roared and tires squealed, and a black sedan slammed into the bikes. The dog rushed out, cussing. He ran to the driver's door, which popped open to slam him in the chest.

Miss Songdog stepped out. Her eyes were a-glow and her aluminum bat gleamed in the streetlights. The dog tried to get to his feet, but she kicked him back down. She threw her hat into the car.

"Pardon me, boys," she chirped. The other two rushed outside. Their friend was writhing at the mechanical chanteuse's feet until she twirled her weapon and slammed it down on his back. He made a pitiful sound.

"You're out awfully late." She walked around the pile of bikes while the two cats held their knives aloft. They backed away as she closed the distance. "You're also disturbing my clients."

One of them hissed and ran at her. He jammed the knife right against her stomach, and the blade buckled and snapped in his hand. She slammed the aluminum against his helmet hard enough to dent both. He turned to try and get up and she crushed his shoulder. She kept hitting him with it until the third man in the blue helmet pulled out a pistol. The way the safety flicked off was audible over the rumble of the motor and the ragged panting of the thug at her feet.

She straightened up. He held the gun aloft. He told her to put down the bat. He was just one stride away. She wound up her leg, and kicked the poor sap at her feet right in the neck, where his helmet didn't protect him.

"Fuck you, bitch!"

There was the sound of a gunshot, but it didn't hit her. Vincy had leapt from his hiding spot and landed on the cat, knocking the gun off target. The fox wasn't much bigger, but his brutality and his switchblade made short work of the cheap motorcycle suit and the cat wearing it.

"Mister Vincy."

"Miss Songdog."

Pawn-n-Loan's owner was put in the hospital. A generous, anonymous donation was made to his recovery fund. Mrs. Pak expressed sincerest apologies for three of her men acting so far out of line. They wouldn't be added to Miss Songdog's open tab.

Business never stopped. The mechanical songdog sat in her overstuffed chair behind her large wooden desk. The blackout curtains made sure the only light was her small paper-shaded lamp.

Here, in her office, were all the trappings of her previous life. A picture frame was face-down on her desk but she still felt the twenty-year-old photo. It was her, back when she was flesh and fur. Her husband was a tall, thin fella. She was a short, curvy woman. They had a classic look going. Their large modern house up on the hill was behind them. The Bartell house.

She opened a drawer and removed a small pocket pistol and a spare magazine. Both of these were slipped into the wide lace garter on the inside of her left thigh. She straightened the hem of her skirt and adjusted her pistol until it was comfortable to sit and walk with.

She held up her phone and peered into the dark screen to see if her hair was presentable. The previous night's festivities left her previous wig a bit disheveled, but that was why she had more than one. Tonight, she thought short and wavy would be the proper look. A simple dress, and, as always, her coat and hat.

She locked the door behind her. Vincy got up from a chair. He locked the door behind her and they both headed down to the car.

They took an indirect route. The meeting was being held on the northern docks. It was a cold evening, and the people in the streets were bundled up. The synth sat in the passenger seat, looking out the window, ignoring her associate's tremors and poor taste in music. He had earned the right to listen to whatever he wanted over these last fifteen years.

The clouds pitched back the light pollution of the city, and the mist in the air turned it all into pillars of color in the darkness of the night. The roiling sea glittered in reds and blues and yellows. The car's wheels ground rough concrete as it rolled to a stop. Vincy got out, and went around to open the door for Miss Songdog. He was grinning. She thanked him, but didn't stand very close to him.

They were meeting with a man from Greece, who had access to the vast wealth of arms and drugs flooding the Near-East. He could get the materials, and she could harness her network for distribution. That was the way it was presented. The cannery was stacked with crates, and the power was on, even though the building had been closed for ten years. The Greek was an amiable cat and a gracious host.

Vincy and the Greek's bodyguard were left outside, while the other two went into a lit office to discuss business. He offered her coffee, and she politely refused. She took a seat at the end of a seven foot long table, and he took his seat at the other end. Opaque glass reflected wavy highlights behind him, and a small space heater must've kept the room cozy enough. Miss Songdog couldn't tell, herself, but she could see its soft red glow, and she almost longed to smell that scent of burning dust that those things often made.

"I must thank you again, Miss Songdog, for coming out and meeting me on such short notice. I appreciate it."

"Thank you, Mister Osman."

"We've talked at length, and I did so look forward to doing business with you. I didn't want to say it in front of your associate, but, I've already reached an agreement with another distributor."

Miss Songdog leaned back in her seat. She set her right hand in her lap. "Why did you let me come all the way out here, then?"

"I wanted to tell you in person."

There was a tense pause where the only noise was the buzzing of the one fluorescent light overhead. Mister Osman laid a large, black pistol on the tabletop.

"And part of the contract was your early retirement."

The coyote shifted in her seat. Her left hand was still on the table, balled up into a fist. Her eyes narrowed with a click. "Who was it?"

"Your very vulpine friend. Now, let's not make this too much of a hassle. A doll like you should have an off switch."

He reached for the gun, but with her left hand she grabbed the corner of the table and flipped it over. She pulled her pistol from under her skirt and blasted him in the chest thrice, splattering blood on the window. He hit the ground but was still breathing. She put one last one in his head and picked up his pistol that had been tossed aside.

The bodyguard opened the door. "Mister Osman, is it done?" He jumped when he saw the mechanical woman leaning over his body. She casually lifted Mister Osman's gun while the bodyguard struggled with his holster. She pulled the trigger while stepping forward until he was on the ground and his skull was no longer in one piece.

Outside, Vincy was nowhere to be found, but there was no shortage of panicked, armed men. A burst to her chest made the songdog twitch, but just as quickly she turned and killed the man who'd dared to ruin one of her favorite jackets. She ducked around the side as sparks flew up all around her. With machine-like precision, she blasted an Uzi-wielding dog straight off the perforated catwalk. His body crunched as he hit the ground nearby her, and she threw away the late Mister Osman's pistol to heft the submachinegun.

Another burst of fire rattled her, and she slumped over for a moment. She shook as she fell down to her knees and error messages flashed across her eyes. Her body jerked like a tangled

marionette as she picked herself and the gun back up off the floor. Her neck twisted and she rolled her head over her shoulder to deliver a much more fatal burst to the shocked man.

By this time, the gang was falling back, but she pursued them into the stacks of crates towards the exits. A dog ran into the open and he was choking on his own blood in no time. They were wholly unprepared for any kind of resistance, but she wasn't after them. She was looking for Vincy.

She made her way out of the cannery and saw the fox slipping into the car. A string of fire turned the windshield opaque, but the engine roared to life and the vehicle lurched forward. The Uzi was empty. The grill of her car slammed into her and pinned her to the corrugated steel wall.

Her body was making horrible screeching noises. Warnings flashed across her eyes as Vincy got out of the car, blood streaming from his wrinkled nose. She tried to reach for the pocket gun under her skirt, but she couldn't.

Vincy produced a large silver handgun from inside his sport coat. He whipped it across her face with a loud crash and a rattle. Her jaw hung open as she stared back up at him. He leveled the gun. The aggressive compensator scuffed the plastic between her eyes.

"I'd torture you, but it wouldn't be any fun. I know you can't feel a thing." He emptied the gun into the wall behind her head, each shot rattling her frame and the car and rolling his wrist, but only her eyes twitched. He leaned forward and grabbed her muzzle and jaw. He was close enough to kiss her. "I'd kill you, but you've already been dead for fifteen years."

Her large eyes rolled up to look across his face that took up her whole field of vision. He was grinning, but his hackles were up, his ears were pinned. His nose dripped blood onto the hood of the car.

"Don't lie to me, Vincy. You're afraid of what would happen if you killed me." She forced out a laugh.

The fox grabbed her by the wig. "I'm telling Van Grantze. I'm telling him everything."

"Oh, sweet little Vincy. What are you going to tell him?"

"I'm going to tell him who did it. I'm going to tell him that you killed Jeff Decouier. Then, I won't have to lift a finger to see you scrapped."