

I was on Miss Songdog's couch for days before I could finally sit up without feeling dizzy. Eventually, I was hobbling around her flat and making a mess. It helped that I was out of my mind on one potent course of painkillers. It was a hell of a way to stave off boredom.

In my shaking, feverish dreams I saw that the past was a great, toothy, yawning maw, a gaping hole, and I was standing on the edge of it. I saw faces of people I've loved before, from my mother to Jeff. I even saw the face of that prostitute who'd hit me up the other night. There was something off about her and the extent of her overhaul that didn't sit quite right with me.

I saw the face of the woman I loved before I left for Chicago. What was her name? She was smiling. I asked her about her husband. He was gone. It was good. He was a real shithead, but he had the money to land the dame, and I had the personality and irresponsibility to cuckold him.

In the dream she ran her hands along my face and they felt like plastic. She clicked when she moved. Her eyes were glassy. We floated in and out, just staring into each-other's eyes while I babbled incoherently and she laughed and smiled. When she opened her mouth, the past was a bottomless hole in the back of her throat that crackled with revenge. As she walked, spent brass casings fell from her sleeves and hit the floor.

She told me something important, but I didn't remember it when I was suddenly soaked in cold sweat. The blankets and cushions were wet. I sat up and pulled my hand through my fur. I looked around the dark living room while I sat there, waiting to stop shivering.

Light streamed in through the blinds. Bars of neon changed colors and glinted off the figurines on the shelves, the jewelry boxes, and the wine glasses in the cabinet. I listened, and didn't hear anyone home.

I managed to stumble into the bathroom to hike my leg. I splashed cold water on my face, as if that'd help. I was spinning, but I noticed something. The door to one of the rooms was slightly agape.

I should've let it be, but I was still as curious as a cat. I pushed it open. It didn't creak. The silvery computer-screen blue glow of the billboard outside was just enough for me to see the slightly opened drawer of the nightstand. I crept over to it on bare feet and pulled it further open. The stark khaki color of a folder glared up at me. I picked it up. It had my name written on the tab. It took me a minute to sort it out, but it was definitely Jeff's handwriting.

The front of a folder never felt so heavy. My hand trembled as I turned it over. Inside were photographs. It was me, at the bar. It was me on the balcony in Chicago. It was my police ID, scanned. It was me in Navy cracker jacks. There were clippings of cases I worked on, copies of my police dossier, handwritten notes that had such a level of detail they even openly noted me as bisexual, talked about how I was habitually late, a compulsive hero, and liked salty snacks.

There were photos of me with that coyote. She and I, smoking on the balcony, late at night when her man was out doing lines off hookers or who knew what. She and I getting into the car. Me, holding her from behind in her kitchen. There was a large, circled dollar sign on each photo, and her husband's name. Bartell.

I heard footsteps out by the door. I all but slammed the drawer shut and limped back out into the hallway in front of the restroom as quick as I could.

Miss Songdog let the door slowly swing open in front of her. She was covered in dirt. There were at least a dozen bullet holes in her. She was twitching her head and her hand in an odd way as she walked inside.

“Fran.” Her voice was off. I couldn’t quite discern what was happening. I worried she was about to die.

“Songdog.”

She stepped inside. She slammed the door closed behind her. She locked it without looking. Her big, dead eyes were focused on me and flicked up and around.

“Fran. Vincent Getavo is no longer under my employment.”

“He’s dead?”

“Not yet.”

She slid her coat off and threw it on the ground. Her dress was torn. There was a large smear of mud across the front and back of it. She took off her hat, and the powder burns on her wig were apparent.

She dragged herself over to her chair in the living room before she collapsed. She leaned over and held her head in her good hand. I walked up and stood in front of her. I thought about asking her about what happened. I thought about telling her about what I found. I thought about sitting down on the couch and getting off my throbbing leg. I thought about a lot of things.

She looked up at me. From the angle, her eyes looked different. The way her face was shaped made her look emotional. Her mechanical body’s shuddering looked like sobbing. She smelled like gunpowder and rain and a musty place. I got weak in my good knee.

“Fran...” She kept saying my name. Just my first name. Not ‘Mister Fran’, not ‘Mister Van Grantze’, but Fran. It was odd to hear. For an instant, her autotuned voice sounded natural.

“What, Miss Songdog?”

She grabbed me. She rested her head on my stomach. She held her arms around my hips and I was nearly pulled off my feet. I waited for something to happen. I waited for her to do something, but she didn’t for a long time. My fur was all on end. My snout was wrinkled, a little from pain, a little from worry. I couldn’t see her face. Her hair was a mess. Why was this familiar?

“I have something to tell you.” She looked me in the eyes again. “You know who I really am.”

“You’re Miss Songdog.”

“We loved each other once. Do you remember it?”

I froze. My heart was pounding. I was swimming. The room was spinning. The lights were getting vivid. I was freezing. All at once, she was the entire focus. I looked over her. I was confused.

“My name was Margaret Bartell.”

It hit me like the L-track. My eyes widened and my mouth was dry and suddenly her perfume was familiar, her eyes were familiar, her touches were the same. I forgot she was plastic and software. I fell to my knees. Her hand caressed my shoulder and I felt like liquid. The walls were melting and going wavy around her.

“Do you remember, Fran?”

I did. Those nights when her husband was away on business, and her soft body, and her intelligent smile, and her cunning tricks, and that one time I had to jump off the balcony in just my britches and she threw my clothes down after me. It was all running together in my head. I remembered seeing her afraid for the first time, when something happened, when she confessed to me that someone might be trying to kill her, and I thought it was just paranoia. I remembered the tears she left on my shirt collar when he was killed. I remember when she died in the car fire.

"Oh my god."

I swore she was smiling. She leaned down. We were both on the floor of her apartment now. I could feel the blood soaking my fur around the wound. She was on top of me. I could see the bullet holes in her plastic body and hear the machinery straining within.

"I wish I could've told you sooner."

"Fifteen years... The car bomb?"

"It hurt. A lot."

"Maggie..."

"No," she turned away for a second, "Don't call me that. I just need to know... Fran. After all these years, do you still love me?"

Was it the drugs? Was it the pain? Was it the killing? Was I desperate because Jeff was dead? Was I desperate because of the file I found, that made me think, for the first time, that Jeff wasn't all he seemed to be? Was it because I'd loved Maggie Bartell? Was it the memory of sitting in my Chicago apartment after she died, staring out the window, imagining myself having a picnic on the tracks just as the train came by?

"I do."

"Say it." Her weight pressed in on me. I winced.

"I always loved you, Maggie--"

"No." She cut me off. She squeezed my arm. I stared up at her twitching eyes and noticed the deep shadows around them.

"I love you, Miss Songdog."

She was inscrutable. She rested her head on my neck. Her body mechanically shuddered. I was crying and she could feel it. My mind was swimming. I was all sorts of numb all over from the painkillers. I was floating and hot, and still felt like I was over a deep chasm, and she was laying on top of me. Her plastic hand ran over my chest. Her plastic face leaned in. My eyes closed. I leaned up and pushed my lips to hers. There was no breath to feel leave her mouth or nose.

She pulled herself up. She was straddling me. She reached behind her head and behind her back, and unzipped the back of her dress, before pulling it clean off. I could see the chipped edges of the damage and the fractures across her stomach. I could feel the smooth doll-like anatomy of her groin against my bare stomach through her lingerie. As she leaned back down onto me I saw glimmers of light from the exit wounds.

Her hand slipped lower over my belly. I hardly noticed when she pulled my waistband aside. I was still holding her shoulder. She was leaning to the side. Her breasts pressed against my chest through her bra. They gave a little. They must've been some sort of silicone. They weren't warm. None of her really was. She had the chill of the night air on her still. It wasn't exactly pleasant. I wasn't exactly in my right mind or in any state to protest. I almost said her name again, her old name, but I bit my lip. I was starting to fade out again. Things were coming and going in waves.

What was I supposed to say? Sorry honey, I have a headache, I'm not in the mood? She took what she want and I guess I had a little pride that she wanted me, even though I'd been a sad mess of fluff on her couch for over a week and smelled a lot like piss and not very much like sunshine. She couldn't smell, could she? And my rocket was taking its time to launch. I was nauseous in that dumb

way when you haven't eaten but your appetite's not there and hasn't been in a while. I didn't want this right now. It was happening.

Couldn't lie. It felt okay, as far as I could feel it. Her grip was tight. The silicone pads on her fingers were soft. She was skillful. She took up my whole vision with her polymer mask and her camera eyes behind those glassy lenses. They flickered back and forth looking over me. I felt the air cool the wet fur on my cheeks.

I'd like to say I made a mess, but I was too much of one, myself. It just kind of dripped out and I kind of held on while my numb legs pedaled a bit of air and I made a sound that wasn't very masculine. I couldn't tell if she was satisfied or pleased or disgusted as she wiped a drop on my nose and told me to go clean myself up.

The next evening I after I woke up from a long lucid string of nightmares, Miss Songdog was made up in a different blonde wig and a different dress. She had a fresh suit sitting on the coffee table in my size and measurements, and my revolver was scrubbed clean and oiled.

"You can't stay here, Mister Van Grantze. It's too dangerous."

I looked up, still trying to wipe sleep out of my eyes. "For me, or for you?"

She tilted her head as if to smirk. "Vincy knows you're here. You ought to go home and get some more rest. ...That is, unless you think you could stand a fight in this condition."

I looked down. Nah. I couldn't. My arms were too shaky. My legs and knees were still weak. "Can I at least get a shower first?" Her face didn't change. "I'll get dressed and go."

The pants were difficult to pull on since I couldn't quite lift my leg all the way. I didn't even bother with the dress shirt. I pulled the suit jacket on and stuffed my street prescription in the pockets. I got my trenchcoat and took a moment to examine the ragged hole in the skirting of it before throwing it over my shoulders. My revolver sat snugly in the front right pocket that it normally called home.

Getting down the stairs was tough, and I had to hold on to the structurally dubious bannister the whole way down. The bear from earlier was at the door again. He simply nodded to me as I gritted my teeth and left the building for the cold outside.

My car was where I left it. Driving was no small feat. I wasn't all there, and probably came off like the most vindictive asshole in the city to whoever was unfortunate enough to tail me. Darkness was settling in before I pulled into my apartment's parking lot. The familiarity lulled me into complacency. I eyeballed two black SUVs I'd never seen before, but they weren't parked together, and people were always coming and going from this dump. The familiar sounds of the neighbor's loud televisions and kids shouting far down the hall were, for once, nice to hear.

My mailbox was empty. Normally I'd have at least four papers by now. I was too tired to think more deeply on it and headed right up the stairs. I struggled with the door until I could open it. I was inside. I closed it behind me and turned around.

The pitch darkness of the room suddenly blinked away and the slide of a pistol slammed against the side of my head. So much for a relaxing evening on the couch. I was grabbed by two strong men and was being shouted at by a third. They searched my pockets and pulled out my revolver and my pack of needles and threw them on the couch. I tried to make a quip but my mouth was full of blood and my tongue was starting to swell up. I'd bitten it in surprise. They ended up pulling me into the kitchen and shoving me into a chair at the table.

Across from me was the elderly feline Synth had dealings with earlier, flanked on either side by suited cats with silenced guns. She was dressed eloquently in a traditional dress and had her hair done-up in a grey bun. There was a small wooden-handled straight-edged knife on the table.

"Ah, Mister Van Grantze. You're late."

"Mrs. Pak. I've been on a small vacation."

She chuckled. "Well, I hope you enjoyed. I just want you to know, you've opened a tab with my business, and I'm very particular about tabs being paid off in a tidy, say, efficient way."

My stomach sank and the room throbbed. "You're going to kill me?"

"My associates would enjoy that, yes. They'd greatly love to add your funeral to the list you've already given us. Do you know how many settlements I've had to pay out? How many caskets I had to buy? How many grieving mothers I had to console, who thought that with me, their sons would be safer than on the streets? But no. Your death couldn't possibly cover that tab, and would preclude any kinds of further payment."

She held up the knife. The fellow to my left grabbed my arm and balled my hand into a fist and pulled my pinky out. I struggled to pull away, but his grip was too tight. The man on my right grabbed that arm and held it on the table as well. No matter how much I thrashed, they held.

"Don't struggle, Van Grantze." She set a cloth down and my left hand was placed onto it. The knife was placed nearby, and my right hand was pushed onto it. "Grab the knife, Van Grantze. We'll help you."

I couldn't fight my way out of this one. Even if I managed to stab one of the suits, I'd get shot dead right here, right now. I grabbed the knife. They let go of my right arm. I knew how this went. I stopped struggling. I was lucky I was on something, and lucky my stomach was empty, or I'd have upchucked.

"You know how this goes, Van Grantze."

I trembled. These guys were waiting for any excuse to be able to kill me right there. I'd killed a lot of their friends. I held the knife over my pinky, at the first knuckle from the tip.

"One more."

The second knuckle. How many of those guys had I killed? Six, maybe? The blade was sharp and cold. I had to just get it over with. I slammed the knife down like a guillotine. I sawed a little, before I saw the digit come lose. It hurt, but it was still far away from me for now.

The knife was twisted out of my grip. Mrs. Pak demanded I wrap the finger in the bloody cloth. I held my hand to my chest. Blood ruined my new shirt. I shakily wrapped my finger in the cloth, and held it up to her with a shaking hand. She took it from me, and held the package in her lap.

"Thank you, Mister Van Grantze. I accept your gracious first payment on your tab. I'll have my men contact you for further payment. You owe my company a few favors now, and I'm sure you'll be happy to repay them."

And then they were gone. I was lying on the kitchen floor, cradling my left hand in a dish rag for who knows how long. Eventually, I made it to the couch, and fell asleep in my bloody clothes.