

"What happened to your finger?" My drinking buddy asked. She was a collie, about forty five. Her brown hair shone a sort of hazy gold in the murky lights of the industrial-styled bar. The laughter all around us and behind us made it hard to hear. There was some unimportant game of football on one screen behind her, and the other kind of football on the other. I was holding my glass with my left hand. I hadn't even realized.

"I was working on my car." The answer didn't satisfy her. She thought to press further, I could tell. Her ears perked up and everything, but instead she just took another drink.

"They always did say that every good project takes a bite out of you." She drank again. Her cider was almost done already. The blue of the neon beer logo behind the counter shone off the lighter fur on her snout. She was always stunning, even back when we were on the force, even back when she had blood and spit and puke on her. Once or twice we'd been partners, but we'd always been good friends. She had an adult daughter and a teenage son. Her husband was working late at the office tonight.

"How's Frankie?" Beat. "I already asked that."

"You doing okay, Fran?"

I knew she could tell I'd been messed up. It'd been weeks. Months. Who knows? It was grey and cold outside and winter was about to slam the hammer down, and I'd been using regularly. She wasn't a detective, at least, not since she promoted up to a desk job, but she was still sharp as a tack.

"The doc changed my prescription. I'm still catching up on it." It wasn't a lie, at least.

"If you say so." She'd seen me take enough physical punishment. I was an old man already, and had aches and pains even when we'd worked together. It all worked out. "You weren't at Frankie's birthday. Just about everyone from the old department was."

"I'm sure you had to babysit enough drunk old men."

She laughed. She finished her beer. "You're right, but you're never around anymore. We were hoping to see you more once you got back from Chicago, but... Listen. I know the whole thing with Jeff must be tough."

I swished my whiskey. I looked away from her for a moment. I could see both of us in the etched mirror on the wall behind the bartop. She was leaning closer to me than I'd thought.

"You know, Fran... I know you and him had a thing. I'm sorry it didn't work out, way back when."

"Conflict of interest. You know how it goes."

"Don't I. Still."

I looked her in the eyes. "It wasn't a suicide."

She bit her lip. "You can't be sure."

I had to be. I didn't answer her. My whiskey was gone, and like Jeff, all it left was a bitter, heady burn in the back of my throat and down in my gut.

She checked her phone. It was getting late. "Fran, it was nice to run into you. Here, put your number in my phone." She handed me the thing and continued. "My nephew, you remember him? He's turning twenty one in two weeks. You should come over, Frankie and the guys will be there. Big barbecue and all. Drinking and home-cooking."

"Thanks, Janie. I always appreciated your cooking." I handed her phone back. "Tell Frank and the kids I said hey."

Like gin, the moment was bitter. I don't know what she wanted to say as her muzzle was open and I could see just the tips of her white teeth behind her black lips. She looked in my eyes and hers wavered. I didn't want to delude myself into thinking we ever could've had something. Frankie and her had been on and off again for ages. She had a better life with him. He had a job with good benefits and plenty of vacation time; I was about to go kill someone.

She left. She pulled her coat on and I felt the cold from the door brush against my face as she disappeared into those grey, steely evening streets.

The past was a gaping maw, hungrily eating up everything it could. Its teeth were the tall skyscrapers and its tongues were the winding, patchy asphalt roads. I walked along, smoking my cigarette. The clouds threatened rain. Miss Songdog said I could meet Martin Madeo here, and it's where I was.

Martin Madeo was one of the Synth's street level dealers. He, of course, was late on his payments. I knew the kind. Poor guy was likely becoming his own best customer, and when you're selling to yourself, you tend to cut yourself a good deal. It was all routine as could be.

The club was rank with sweat and the music was too loud. I'd just come from one bar and came straight to this one. I figure they were the person who'd be able to hook me up. I didn't ask until I was two more drinks in. Things were getting pretty fuzzy now, but I felt warm and the music didn't hurt so sharply anymore. I was starting to like the song. The DJ was one cool cat. The crowd loved him too. I couldn't see too much from the flashing lights and the noise. It was doubtful the tenants in the condos overhead were too enthused about where they lived, but they did sign the lease.

Eventually I managed to ask about Marty in the lull between two tracks. I found myself in the humid, grungy brick hallways in the bowels of the building, going up into dim yellow lights. If it smelled bad out there, it was worse in here for how stale it was.

I mounted the stairs to his place and the dull thudding of the club's bassline still vibrated the floor. I knocked three times. I heard shuffling and rustling inside, then too many locks being thrown open. The door opened. There was a scrawny, sunken-eyed weasel looking up at me.

"What you want, poodle?"

I put my hand up on the doorframe and leaned in. "I heard you can hook me up."

His eyes flicked up and down. "Cash?"

"Always."

"Who told you about me?"

"A little songbird."

He frowned. He closed the door, unlatched the chain, and opened it all the way.

Weasels were a musky sort, worse than foxes. They smelled in a way that cologne didn't help very much. This whole place stank. It'd probably take a day to get out of my coat. I took a seat on a chair and he went to a drawer in the kitchen.

"What's your poison, pal?"

"Something to perk me up. Something like this." I took the tin out of my breast pocket and opened it on his coffee table. He came over to look at it. He held up a single-dose syringe to the dull yellow ceiling light.

"Military grade. You don't look like the type."

"I try to make it last. I just need something to perk me up."

"Old age catching up?"

"You could say that."

"Here's something classic, pure as you can get around here."

I asked for a sample. I took it off the corner of my thumb. It wasn't the best, but maybe I was spoiled from my days in the force. Then again, I didn't really need to pay for it back then. I waited a minute. I was starting to really wake up. So much for all that drinking earlier.

"I like it. But I'm here on some other business, too."

His ears fell to the sides of his head.

"Miss Songdog. You owe her some money."

"I don't have any cash."

"There's an ATM around the corner. Why don't we take a little stroll?"

"Okay," he conceded. I stood up and he went out the door first. I let him lock it behind us. We went down the stairs and left through the tenant entrance that emptied into a yellow-lit alley piled high with stinking, slick plastic garbage bags and bits of soggy paper. The city's light made the clouds into a low, opaque ceiling.

There was a small corner store on the opposite tip of the block from the club. There was just another turn to go before we were out on the street by it. The weasel went around the corner in front of me, but as I turned it, I ran smack into his elbow. I was trying to gulp my breath back down when he grabbed my tie and slammed me against the wall.

This guy was young and strong. I wasn't quite either one of those. I kicked him in the leg as hard as I could, but I couldn't tell if it hurt him anymore than it hurt me. I slammed my fist against his head, but he just took it. He raised his fist to hit me, and that's when I managed to bend his elbow and take it to the ground.

I landed on him and he was breathless. Sure he was strong, but I still had the height and mass advantage. I beat my elbow down on his neck until he squeaked and threw me off.

We both shuffled to our feet. He was bleeding, my shirt was untucked. He closed in quick and managed to bowl me clean over. His fists weren't gentle kissers, and this guy was less than a considerate lover to have on top of me, so eventually I twisted and slammed him to the ground. I put my knee in his stomach and slammed my elbow on him again. I grabbed his head and bounced it off the dingy concrete. It made him yelp. I managed to push myself to my feet. I stumbled a couple steps. He made to get up, and I kicked him in the ribs like I was trying to make a goal. He didn't go very far, though. Ferrets don't make great soccer balls.

While I was taking a moment to catch my breath and squeeze my aching hand, I saw a glowing red dot come out of the alley. It was pulling along a cigarette and the face of a black cat I recognized.

"So that's why you turned me down? You like to beat up on guys, instead?" The smoke curled around her head in the buzzing, dim light. Her built-in heels clicked and the dainty toes of her boots ground the rough debris finer. Between us, the weasel groaned.

"I'm a fucking ferret!" he hissed as he pushed himself off the ground. Cheri gingerly strolled over to him, before shoving him back down with her boot on his throat. His hands grasped her mechanical leg, but where he was able to throw me around, she could hardly be moved.

"Honey, you aren't fucking anyone tonight."

“Jesus, Cheri, don’t kill him.”

She looked up at me with a smirk and those bright cat eyes. That was a look that could rob a bank, or bust a camera. She waited until his struggling and kicking started to slow, then she stepped all the way over him and right up to me.

“Sorry to interrupt your playtime, but you two looked about done, anyway.”

“We were just trying to settle a score. I think he got the point.”

She was tantalizingly close. She stood with her hips cocked. I could smell her flowery cigarette. I could hear the creaking of her jacket. I wanted to touch her icy-blond hair.

“Got more business to attend to, then?”

“I think my schedule just cleared up for the night.” What was I saying? Did I really want to go with her? I reached out to put my hand on her shoulders. She stepped back and turned around.

She knelt by the weasel and started going through his pockets. There was a little cash, but not near what I was meant to get for the Synth. Then, there were several small ziplock baggies, the trademark of a professional dealer.

“Looks like we’re going to have some fun, Pops.”

We ended up back at my car and back at my place. I was lifting off by the time we got upstairs. We were laughing and talking about nothing and she drank all my beer. The room was spinning and she was asking me about my finger. I told her I upset a crime boss. She laughed. Her shirt came off. She was only obviously cybernetic from the waist down, all hard black plastic. Her breasts were perfect, too perfect. Her fur pattern was industrially symmetrical, just like about everything else. She had a bit of give, but I couldn’t feel individual ribs under her arms when I held her.

Next to her, on top of her, I was painfully organic. I didn’t have an aug on me from head to toe. She laughed as she traced the messy curls in their narrow line from my belt to my chest. “That’s not a standard clip,” she teased. It wasn’t. I told her I hadn’t gone to the groomers regularly since I promoted off the beat.

She seemed to get excited that I used to be the law. I told her it was just like any other job. It made her snicker. That was a talent I always had. It was just like my dad used to tell me, ‘Make her laugh and next thing you know, you’ll be bumping rails off her tits’. Thanks, dad. It sure was true. I’d like to think he’d be proud, but here I was, an ex-cop, a mob strongarm, snorting mediocre cocaine off a robot hooker’s fake breasts. Probably not what he had in mind for me.

I was probably going to get a noise complaint in the morning. We stayed up way too late. She was soft where it counted. Warm, too. My calloused hands played up and down her like the neck of a guitar. She was a cutting edge, total overhaul, full body prosthetic, and anatomically correct everywhere that didn’t count for style. I was clumsy. She was probably faking it the whole time, but it was enough for me. Her body burned like a radiator inside and out. Her fingers weren’t salty in my mouth. Between her plastic taste and her silicone texture, I didn’t last too long. Afterwards, I held her longer than I should’ve. It must have seemed vulnerable.

I asked her about payment sometime near the end when I was petering down and she was making a sandwich in my kitchen. Apparently whatever she found in Marty’s pockets was enough.

I slept most of the day. When it was starting to get dark, that's about the time I started to get myself together. I managed to fall asleep in the shower again, but sometime after that I was dried and dressed sharp in a new shirt and my favorite suit. I picked the one tie out of my collection that wasn't an affront to fashion. I looked sharp. Tired, but sharp.

I met Songdog at her place. That bear there closed the door behind her. I knew he was watching from the window as she got in my car. She was perfumed and was wearing make-up. Tonight, she was wearing a lively, shiny dirty-blond wig with perfect waves and ringlets down the sides of her head. She had her short red dress and stockings and ruby shoes. Her khaki coat over it all dressed it down. She held a bejeweled handbag in her lap, the strap clasped in fine black-gloved hands.

"Mister Van Grantze," she teased. Even. She seemed to be doing fine. There was no trace of that wavering, no hint of those bullet holes. It was like none of that had ever happened.

"Miss Songdog," I couldn't help but choke up a little. A flood of emotion. It was all muddled up in my head. I still wasn't quite sure what to make of her.

"Have you been to a live theatre, Fran?" Softer, this time.

"I never quite was the type."

"You might like this musical. It's the second night, but it's the good one. No one needs to deal with the build-up of the first night. I'm glad they brought it back. I never did get to see it with my husband."

That was a lot to live up to. "Did you do this sort of thing a lot? I mean, with him." I never did take Mister Bartell as the play-watching type. Not with all the time and money he put up his nose.

"For a time. That's what's to love about Grey Anchor. What a place, Fran. What a night life."

She wasn't wrong. It hadn't gotten any less cloudy from last night, but crisp lights of all colors slid over our heads as we drifted down the road in the warm leather-lined interior of my car. Crowds were blossoming under the marquees. Clubs were jolting to life. Music shook windows and made puddles ripple. People shouted in joy. I couldn't tell if I was on business or pleasure.

We had a reservation for two. A private balcony. Upper crust. The place was elaborately lined with carvings and small gaudy gold details. Foil-like wallpaper surrounded us on almost all sides immediately. We had made it a little early and watched and listened to the scenery being set up behind the stage. It was just us, and in the warm gold light, she looked real. She looked vibrant. Her makeup was expertly applied. It gave a depth and softness to her plastic face that I hadn't gotten to see before. It gave her blushing life. Her eyes ran back and forth with familiarity over the whole place.

I watched her more than the play. I tried to pay attention, but I couldn't quite focus. I'd have quite liked a beer to sip and a bump to wake me up. I chewed my fist. I looked over the crowd. Miss Songdog grabbed my hand and squeezed it. The intermission couldn't arrive soon enough, and when it did I excused myself and ended up holding my head in the bathroom stall for five minutes, wondering why I had this headache and why I wasn't able to focus. I just had to try and power through it. I was stronger than some chemicals, I tried to tell myself.

I didn't remember much about the second half of the play, just that I was leaning on that doll and trying to hold onto myself. She leaned right back against me. The last months replayed over and over in my head. Maggie Bartell. I was sitting next to her. I kept asking myself if I really believed it was her. I couldn't be sure. Maggie Bartell was dead. But, I'd never gone to her funeral. I didn't know if they buried her or some sandbags or some poor schmuck that was unlucky and got stuck in the casket

instead of her. I didn't know what she wanted. Sure, Mister Bartell was linked to some organized crime, but we never got enough dirt to give him any real hell about it. No, we figured we'd better deal with the protestors and the violent crime and leave tax evasion and embezzling to their proper departments. I just couldn't figure out where Maggie fell in with all of that.

"Fran," she whispered, "Are you doing okay?"

"I'm here with you, best seat in the house. I couldn't be doing better."

She made a sound that should've been accompanied by a shrug, but wasn't. "This isn't business, you know. I'm here with you, personally, only because I want to be."

"I'm flattered."

"It's been awhile."

I looked up. She was staring at me. She didn't blink as she leaned in. Her breathless mouth was agape.

"Mag-" I caught myself, "Er, Miss Songdog."

She leaned in. I pushed my mouth against hers. Closer to sober, this time. Closer to her. I held her shoulder. She just held still, while I kissed an expressionless, corpsy polymer form. When it was done, she spared just a second to look me in the eyes, then wiped her mouth. We didn't talk again until the play was over.

I drove the lady back to her place. She leaned over and brushed her nose against my scruff. She lingered just outside of the car door long enough to tell that all I needed to do was whistle if I needed her. Oh boy, I whistled the whole drive home.

I unlocked the door to my apartment and stepped in. No spooks waiting for me. No unwelcome guests. Windows all locked and closed, just like I remembered them. I threw my coat onto my chair and sat on the couch. Beat. There was an envelope on my coffee table. It wasn't a bill. It wasn't signed. I opened it and disgorged its contents.

Photos. High quality photos, on glossy paper. They were from just last night, or very early this morning, if you figured properly. They showed Cheri and I, talking, laughing. They were taken from up close, too, judging by the angles. They were too clear to be zoomed in from any appreciable distance. One of them was framed by my kitchen window, looking into the living room.

A signature lovingly rested on the back of the last photo. One name, in big swishing cursive letters, with a heart dotting the 'I'. Vincy.