

I woke up in the shower with cold water running over me and soaking into my fur. I turned the water off and pushed myself up onto my feet, and shook off. I tried to recollect the last night's activities, but all the drinking and drugs had run together and I wasn't sure what was last night and what was two weeks ago.

Roscoe was in the hospital. He was in stable condition. Verne had dropped him off at the door of the ER without hardly stopping. Luckily that van's plates were bogus, but it didn't matter, because I didn't even see it on the news or on the web. Not a single mention of the unmarked van dropping off a 20-something dog with four gunshot wounds to the gut was worth cutting out room for Hollywood gossip.

I visited Roscoe in the hospital the next day, and while I was there I was questioned by a detective. The guy wasn't like me when I was in his shoes at all. He looked like he didn't have a crooked bone in his body, his suit was nice and freshly laundered, his shirt collar was sharp, his topcoat was heavy and wool. He wore a skinny tie with a plain silver clip, and his pants were hemmed too high. I forgot his name as soon as he said it, and I introduced myself as "Detective Van Grantze, Retired."

"You know this guy?" he asked me with a singsong voice. The guy was modern with a modest undercut, and his accent was local. He would've been cute, if he knew anything about not looking like a tool.

"Yeah. He's a dancer, at one of the clubs I went to, and he's a friend."

The feline lifted his eyebrow. "You frequent clubs with male dancers?"

"You got a problem with that, Mister Fancy Feast?" It was a classic technique. Get him all riled up, and he won't be able to keep the questioning straight. It'd been used on me a few times, but it felt great to turn it around here, and it was working. His ears shot straight up and his tail started flicking.

"No, I'm just clarifying--"

"Clarifying what?"

"Please calm down, sir, we're just trying to figure out who's responsible for his injuries."

I crossed my arms. "Yeah, but you're pissin' in the wrong sandbox. See, it doesn't feel good, does it? Go on, go ask your boss about me and you'll be sending me a gift basket to make up for this."

He made a face and turned to leave. It wasn't the best first impression I could make, but it kept him off my back. Luckily, I'd probably just be passed off as a obstinate senior rather than an uncooperative suspect.

Roscoe was still dosed up on painkillers when I got in there. There were tubes in his arms and his black eye wasn't much better. His other eye was shadowed, and his lips were pale. I pulled the seat up next to his bed and he rolled his head over to look at me. I brushed the fur on his cheek with the back of my hand.

"Hey Fran."

"Roscoe."

"Nurse says I'm gonna live."

"I heard. I'm glad."

"That's if no one else shows up to kill me. I'd be a sittin' duck, you know. Lost a lot of blood, too. Can't eat nothin'. Can't move my legs right."

"No one's going to kill you."

He feebly laughed. "Yeah. You gonna stand out there in shiny armor and challenge anyone who tries?"

"I know some guys that run good security. I already called them."

"Sure, Fran. Guess I can't leave Grey Anchor for a while yet, but, ah, thanks for trying."

"It was nothing."

He laughed again. "You saved my life."

"I'm just glad my car's okay."

We both laughed.

I didn't stick around for long. It was time to get to work, to lean on the perks of my new job in Organized Crime and find out just what was going on here. Detective Kittylitter was going to go write a rude report about me and get nowhere. I was going to crack some heads.

Or so I thought. On the way out, I walked past Jane in the lobby. She noticed me and waved, and there was no way I could just leave without saying something. I stood over by her and leaned on the wall.

"Hey, Franny, what're you doing here?"

"Ah, Jane, just visiting a friend."

"Yeah? I saw you talking to that dandy cat, this about that stripper who showed up with a dozen gunshots? No one knows who did it?"

"Yeah. He's a friend of mine."

"Well, I think he's a little young for you, but it's been ages since you were with anybody. I hope he comes out okay."

I looked away. "We weren't that kind of friends. Just once or twice. But the nurse says he'll live. You know how it is these days, Janie, they got augs for everything."

"I'm here looking after my aunt. She's getting really up there, you know? Her son's been talking about moving her to a home."

I shook my head. "That's tough."

"Sure is."

We said goodbye. I left.

Herbal tea and spices filled my nose. The low red and yellow lights of a fine Korean restaurant with wood and rice paper facades softened the wrinkles on Mrs. Pak's face. She poured her tea from a painted white pot to the winding melody of Asian ambience music that softly whined through the speaker system.

"Thank you for coming, Mister Van Grantze," she began. It was all formalities. I was a little out of my element, for sure, but she'd contacted me and said she had information on the men who attacked Roscoe and I. I wished Miss Songdog was here, but it was just Mrs. Pak, me, and all of Little Seoul to back her up.

"Always, Mrs. Pak."

"Now, as you know, I've let your debt rest since your first payment." She took a sip of her drink. "In light of recent events, I've decided it's in our best interests to try and keep you around long enough to pay it off. After all, we take these things seriously."

I leaned back in my seat and drank my tea. I should've been relieved that they weren't going to just let me die.

"So, as an offer of good will, I've arranged for information on your assailants to be delivered. I have eyes and ears all over Grey Anchor, you know. I have a tap in every database, a finger in every system. I've been keeping tabs on you, and I like what I see."

It was unnerving, but in this day and age, someone was always watching. It was little assurance to know who it was, though. "Thank you, Mrs. Pak."

"It's also of mutual interest, you'll find. The people who are after you could be a very big thorn in my company's side as well, should they be allowed to do as they wish. If you were to take care of the issue, I'd be willing to count that as one installment toward your tab."

My phone rang, interrupting what I was about to say. Mrs. Pak leaned back in her seat and waved her hand to allow me to answer it.

"After all," she said, "It must be important."

The name of the screen was Maggie. The phone weighed a hundred pounds in my hand as I dragged my thumb over the touch screen. The sinking feeling in my gut wasn't from the food.

"Fran," she pleaded. "Fran, is that you?"

"Yes, Miss Songdog. I'm here with Mrs. Pak."

"Good. Verne is... Just get here. Now. Don't stop for anyone."

"I'll be there."

"And Fran?" She paused again. "I..."

"I know." It was all I could say.

"Hurry."

She hung up. I looked up at Mrs. Pak. Her face seemed stern, suddenly. I slipped my phone back into my pocket and made to stand up. I could tell half the restaurant was watching me. The elderly cat steepled her fingers and sighed, not impatiently, but in a resigned way. She knew something, but I didn't have the time or leverage to find out.

I left. My car was parked around the corner. The bumper was dented and the windshield was cracked from the escapade on the highway. I hadn't had time to fix it. The tires dug through the snow piled up in the entryway of the lot and then I was off on the roads.

I turned my heater up. A storm was slated to hit Grey Anchor and they said it looked like it would dump a record snowfall and cold. It was all slated for this weekend. The four day blizzard, they were calling it. The radioman was warning that if it got too bad, emergency services could be suspended. All that tax money the city had built up from the tech boom, and all they had to show for it was a fleet of broken RTVs and countless empty parks full of modern art.

The sun had just set but the clouds made it dark as night by hanging like yellowed blackout curtains over the sky. The road was conspicuously empty. There were only a few cars here and there. Two behind me, one next to me blaring their music loudly.

Two motorcycles stopped in the intersection in front of me. I barely had time to think that this was how Mister Bartell died when I saw the flashes of light and my windshield spiderweb into an opaque mess. I bent myself over against the center column as bullets tore through the sheetmetal and fiberglass. I stepped on the gas. I felt the car lurch forward and saw a handlebar bust the hanging web of broken safety glass into the cab. I just glimpsed a guy on my hood in a motorcycle helmet so thick I

couldn't tell what species he was before he slid off. Over the wind I heard the revving of the motorcycles behind me as they spooled up to give chase.

I could barely see and my heart was pounding in my chest against my body armor. I must have taken a hit or two or more from that barrage. Warning lights were coming on my dash that I had never seen before, but the old girl was still charging. We were just outside Little Seoul, in Skyscraper Harbor. I could see a parking garage coming up on the right.

I would've kept going but a tire exploded out from under me. I slid and nearly split the car in half around a roadside tree before I could manage to slow down. The bikers were right on my ass and all I had was that damn revolver. I had to hope they weren't cyborgs. That would be just my luck.

I kicked the passenger door open and spilled out onto the ground, panting. It was just in time, too, as an SUV slammed the back of the vehicle and crushed it like a pop can. I fired into the behemoth's windows as I ducked into the parking garage.

Right in the middle of the street. These guys had balls. I patted myself over as I ran into the parking garage and took a moment behind a car. I dumped the cylinder and shoved a speedloader into it. Miss Songdog was expecting me. I pulled my phone out of my pocket, turned on 'location' and quickly hit the 'call' button on her contact.

"Fran?"

"Scraper Harbor, 27th and 14th parking garage! These guys are trying to kill me!"

Bullets ripped through the fiberglass body and I jumped out of my skin. I dove over the car behind it without a second thought and didn't take a single hit. My phone was still in one hand and the gun in the other. I spun around and fired from underneath the hood of the car at where I thought I saw the muzzle flash coming from.

Miss Songdog had hung up. I stuffed the phone back in and got up to try and make my way across the aisle. This cat and mouse game ran on until I got to the opposite entrance and saw how boxed in I was. On that side, a pickup truck with fog lights on top blocked the entrance. I had to go up the stairs. Maybe from the second floor I could find another way out, even if it didn't agree with my ankles.

I had three syringes left. The secret fire I kept in my breast pocket was about the only way out of so many situations these days. As I tried to stifle my panting I felt the cold breeze brush across the fur on my face. If I died here, it'd be cold and that'd be it. It'd just be concrete leeching the warmth out of me. These fucks would probably take selfies with my corpse and have a merry time about it. I'd killed a lot of their friends after all. They were the same people who'd tried to kill Roscoe and I in the woods, I was sure of it. If only I'd still had that rifle.

I stuck myself. Two syringes left. I didn't have time to savor the feeling. Within minutes I could hear everything. The boots crunching the pebbles underfoot. Right next to me. Right around the corner. I could smell him. He was coming. I saw the barrel of his gun precede him around the corner. As soon as I saw his head, I jumped. The revolver went up under his chin and I was too close for him to bring the rifle to bear. I pulled the trigger. Suddenly lights came on around me, gun lights. I ripped the rifle from the dead man's quick release sling and disappeared into the dark again. I had a rifle. I could hear the others scurrying around in the garage, behind cars, behind pillars. I nestled up between two SUVs and checked the magazine of the gun and made sure the chamber was loaded. Thirty rounds. I

had to make them count until Miss Songdog and Verne could get here. I hoped that they'd bring the cavalry.

There was a flashlight on the gun. A high lumen deal, the kind we'd used on the force for their disorientating effect. It was much nicer than the one I had back then, even if it was covered in splotches of tan paint.

I was close to the stairs. Another team was coming up. I heard radio chatter but couldn't quite make it out. My eyes were burning. My skin was burning. My knuckles ached as I tightened them around the rifle's foregrip and the rough plastic pistol grip. I lifted it. My thumb was on the flashlight. Just a quick tap to illuminate the targets. Just a quick squeeze of the trigger to kill a man. Just a quick movement to bring the sights to the next man and do the same.

I jumped back behind the SUV and slid around behind the other as they started to light up where I just was. The stairs were covered. The ramps were covered. The entrances and exits were covered. I was trapped in here. Six men out of eight were still alive. I didn't know how many were on the ground floor. Every one of them was out for blood. I was backed into a corner and they were closing in. If I jumped from the second floor, they'd see me and have guns on me before I could even get back up, and that's if I didn't break my leg doing it.

Gunshots. Outside. They didn't sound like rifle shots. A motorcycle engine spooled up and there was shouting. The radios lit up and chattered. They were running into trouble. I pushed the gun onto the hood of the car. Someone was making the laps downstairs around the whole place. The parking garage sounded like Baghdad.

I pulled the trigger and a string of shots tore through a distracted agent. The rest immediately zeroed in on where I was. In an instant the car was Swiss cheese. My only solace was the engine chugging the hits for me. An inch left or right and there was nothing of substance between me and their bullets. The motorcycle was pulling up the ramp now. The blinding headlight flooded the whole floor. The men turned their attention to the rider, holding a machinepistol sideways. Either they were missing or that guy was a cyborg.

I took my opportunity. I leapt out from behind my cover and right up against one of the men. While the rider spun the motorcycle in place and fired with machinelike precision I threw a cat to the ground and blasted his goggles off. I ejected the empty mag and fished a new one from his plate carrier and slapped it in. I moved onto the next target. They'd split towards the stairs. The rider turned and looked at me and gestured to the back seat of their motorcycle, where another helmet rested.

I was barely buckling it under my chin after wrapping my coat tails around my legs when we were off. We attracted fire as the bike ripped through the garage and out the entrance where the sentries that earlier blocked my egress now lay dead in the snow.

No one gave chase, but the rider drove like a bat out of hell anyway. When we finally stopped in an alley I didn't recognize, the snow was really starting to pick up, and I was cold as hell from the ride. I almost fell when I was finally able to dismount, and stomped off my hands and feet.

"Thank fuck," I shuddered. "Thank fuck for Synth's men."

The rider took off their helmet. It was Miss Songdog. "Synth? Is that what you call me when I'm not around?"

"Maggie!"

"They really were trying to kill you."

"Yeah, you think I was fucking joking? Those guys are paramilitary or something!"

She dismounted the motorcycle. I didn't know she could ride like that, but I was lucky she could. She cradled the helmet under her arm as she began to unbutton the tall collar of her jacket. To be fair, her motorcycle outfit didn't show much of any curves for all its protective padding, and the only time I'd ever seen her wear pants of any kind was the one time we went horseback riding in fall about twenty years ago.

"Put that gun under your coat or something," she huffed. I realized I still had the rifle in my hands. I tucked it away like she said, holding it awkwardly with my left arm with the stock under my shoulder as we crossed the street. Miss Songdog seemed to be in a dark mood. I was still riding a high that was more than adrenaline as we entered her apartment building. My mind was running a mile a minute. She stopped at the door to her flat, though, and looked up at me.

"There's a reason I called you over here, Fran."

"You mean it wasn't so I could get waylaid by a PMC and nearly die?"

"No."

She opened the door and stepped inside.

As I walked in I was hit by the smell of blood.

There was the severed head of a bear on her coffee table, eyes bruised, mouth open and jaw misaligned in a ghastly way, tongue hanging out the side, fur scorched. I almost didn't recognize him at first, for how different he looked.

Verne was dead.

"What happened?"

"They killed Verne." She went and sat on the couch in front of his head. She looked like a heaped up puppet.

"Who?"

"Vincy. Vincy and the PMC."

"Vincy's pulling their strings?"

"Ever since the charity banquet..."

"How?"

"He's paying them. He emptied one of my overseas accounts. Completely closed. Millions of dollars. That must be what he's using it for." She reached forward and stroked her hand across his contorted snout. "He had them kill Verne."

I took my coat off and picked up the rifle. I didn't want anything to do with this. I wanted to cover up Verne's head and make this all go away, or just do my job and leave. Maggie, however, was mourning. I sat on the floor by the door, looking up at her.

"It was Verne, you know," she sighed as she settled onto the couch. "It was Verne that pulled me out of the burning car. It was Verne that arranged for me to get scanned into this body. He's the reason I'm alive at all."

I didn't know what to say. What could I say? It wasn't even until yesterday that I had any inkling someone was actually after us, and even then, Verne and I had thought it was completely between Cheri and Roscoe.

We had been wrong. And now Verne was dead.

Miss Songdog looked over at me. She had that dead look in her eyes. That pleading, sinking look, like she was going under again. There was nothing I could do.

I was home later that night. I left and I brought the rifle with me. I wrapped it in my coat. I'd left Verne's head on Miss Songdog's table. What was I supposed to do? Take him and put him in a box? Put a handkerchief over him? I was sick to my stomach just thinking about it. I hated leaving her when she wasn't in her right mind, but I had to try and get some rest.

I had to call in my car as stolen. I left a message with the VIN and the license plate number. That'd clear me of guilt when they found it. At least, it might. I hated to lose that thing after all these years and going to Illinois and back, and even to the Carolinas. Was there a Valhalla for cars?

Next I had to get some armor. Something serious, heavy duty. I was going to stop this once and for all. Vincy was going to die. I idly watched the weatherman as I tore open my mail. It'd be tough to get around tomorrow, but I'd manage it. I'd taken Verne's SUV.

There was an envelope from Mrs. Pak. It was an address and a short briefing on what Miss Songdog had told me. Vincy was heading the PMC. He was leading them on this revenge mission or something, and paying them big bucks. They were operating out of an abandoned warehouse on the seaside next to the derelict Pier 14 shopping mall.

There was a neat envelope from Vincy. I wasn't even surprised this time. I didn't read it. I crumpled it up and threw it aside, took too many painkillers, and passed out on my bed.