

The storm was just like they said. Outside Miss Songdog's apartment building, knee-deep snow blocked the road. The city was locked down and the plows had given up, emergency services were suspended. A quarter of the city was experiencing a blackout.

She was sitting alone in the apartment building, having hardly moved from the previous day. Verne's head was still on her coffee table. She'd closed his eyes at some point, and pushed his tongue back into his mouth, to give him a little dignity. Things were spiraling out of her grip like sand in the wind and here, the last friendly connection to her old life, was dead. Vincy was somewhere else, but she no longer had the wherewithal to pursue him.

Thought the bleak silence of the winter wind the sound of engines made it to her ears. So this was it, then. It didn't matter how they'd gotten through the weather, she was on her way out. It snapped her from her soliloquy and she sat forward and brushed the acrylic hair of her wig out of her face. She took a perfumed handkerchief from her pocket, opened it, and gently laid it over Verne's face.

Outside, two lifted SUVs came to a stop on either side of the road, blocking it off. Eight men disgorged from each, dressed in tactical gear. The snow piled on to the flat grey and the coyote tan of their gear. Masks protected their snouts from the bitter cold wind and anti-fog goggles kept their eyes from the chill. Two teams of four formed up on the front door and the others moved around to the back of the building to cut off any attempted escape.

Each of them checked their weapons, heavy short-barreled thirty caliber rifles, mounted with lights and a dot sight. The man in front, closest to the door, had a shotgun. He nodded at the man across from him. On the count of three, he blasted the hinges of the door with slugs, drew back and the other dog came forward and kicked the door in. It was easy to hear the noise going on the opposite side of the building where the steel fire exit door was being breached.

There was no response. The ground floor of the apartment building was dark and quiet. Dust streamed through the searching lights on their guns as the two teams spread out to secure the place room by room.

The stairs creaked under their feet as they moved to the next floor, then the next floor. They already knew where Miss Songdog's apartment was. After all, Vincy had the plans. He'd briefed them, he'd showed them the place. It was under surveillance for a week before this. And, with the raging storm, and the suspension of emergency services, they could make as much noise as they wanted without anyone to bust the party.

Now they were at the top floor. Miss Songdog could hear them. She'd thought about putting on her bullet-proof vest, but what was the point? This was it anyway. She'd taken a moment to prepare herself, to change into her favorite dress, to pull her boots on, to adjust her wig. In her dark, grey tomb she was waiting.

The PMC team formed up on the door.

Two slugs into the doorjamb. A swift, sturdy kick.

Miss Songdog was standing in the open, holding a grenade in her hand. The pin was pulled, the lever was off. She tossed it between the man's legs. It left a dent in the drywall across the hallway where it hit. There was hardly time for the pointman to shout before it detonated.

The entire building shook and dust poured down from the ceiling. The hallway was a complete dusty mess of powdered drywall and exposed wiring, and water poured out of breached pipes overhead.

and in the floor. The survivors of the breaching team were picking themselves up as the synthetic woman strode out into the hallway clutching a machinepistol.

She raised it and fired at a man to the right of the door who was twitching. A burst of rounds poured through his mask. From behind, she was lit up with fire. She stumbled from the impact of the rounds. Error messages cropped up in front of her eyes as the bullets tore through her polymer sheathing easily, the soft copper and lead splattering at impact on her internal machinery, the steel cores burrowing deep. She twitched and gasped for air she didn't need and couldn't get. For a second, she froze and the fire ceased.

Radio chatter. "What was that explosion, Alpha Team?"

A pause. Grating on the debris, Miss Songdog turned her head toward the last few men of the breaching team behind her. Slowly, her body followed.

"Jesus Christ," one of them muttered. They began to back up. Through the smoke their flashlights gleamed off her oversized, hungry eyes. She stepped towards them. They stepped back. She raised the machine pistol.

They fired. It didn't help them. It was not that every bullet she caught wasn't damaging, wasn't tearing through the delicate machinery that made up her existence, it was that she felt no pain, and beyond the big red error messages overlaying her vision, and the quick scrolling of codes, it meant nothing to her.

The men were armored, but that didn't matter too much, because she let the recoil of the pistol pull itself up in a string from the chest to their head. She pushed the first man's twitching body aside and the second tried to turn and run past his comrade, but she grabbed him by the back of his plate carrier. She slammed his head through the wall and ran a stream of rounds through his neck and dropped him.

The last survivor of the team heard a click and felt no recoil. By now, Miss Songdog's chassis was torn and blasted apart. The exposed mechanical and electrical components of the machine underneath were bared in spots. Like a demented puppet she languidly raised the machine pistol, but instead of firing, it did nothing. The slide was locked open.

The relief in the man's gut didn't last. She didn't need a gun to kill.

The team on the ground-floor had split, and sent four of their men up. The pointman of Bravo's detachment walked right into a scene from a nightmare. The twisted, mangled robot held up the broken corpse of his comrade. His neck was twisted and his head hung limp like there was no structure left. She'd torn the gun from his body and it was dented and covered in gore.

She threw the body at him and hot, wet blood splattered over his mask and his gear. Then she was right on top of him.

The walls sparked, as a fire flared up in the hallway where the grenade had gone off. It backlit the monstrous, gaping visage of the synth. It highlighted the abyssal cavities of her body torn through by the shooting. It lit her hand reaching for his neck in slow motion, but he couldn't move fast enough to get away from it, and it closed around his neck and he pulled the trigger but it didn't do anything that he could see.

She was fading out, though. Her body wasn't move the way it was supposed to. The error signs were flickering. Her vision was flickering. She wasn't getting any of the feedback she was used to. Her precious little sensory feedback was being cut off. All she heard was static. All she saw was flashes. She

wasn't even sure what she was doing and reality felt skewed. The bullets didn't stop and she wasn't sure how many men she killed. Eventually that was it, though. She was a floor down, or something like that. She was on the stairs. Her legs were shaking. She'd been dragging one along, locked in its position from some kind of ballistic debris peening and destroying the joint. She was holding onto the corpse of a dog and his face was an unrecognizable mass of gore loosely filling his ski mask like bloody hamburger meat loose in a plastic grocery bag.

She dropped him. She slumped down. Time stopped. She heard the engine outside again, but this time it faded off, moving away in the snowy street, struggling through the high drifts.

She was alone again. She couldn't move her legs. She couldn't wipe away the error message. She was on the landing of the stairs in the corner. Up near the top, she could see the orange glow of fire brightening. Fire, again. It was what killed her the first time, when she was Maggie Bartell. It was an appropriate bookend.

If only she could just take one last ragged breath.

If only she could see Vincy again. See his red fur and his bright eyes. Maybe like when he was young. Twenty years ago. Was that it? It was something like that. She couldn't remember. Not remembering was strange for a full-body aug like herself. The digitized brain could recall so many things in perfect crisp clarity. Now she was fuzzy. She couldn't remember how long it'd been. But he was her's. His parents worked for her husband. That was at the start of their troubles. When Mister Bartell was trying to expand his business, when his captain, Vincy's father, Mister Getavo, and Vincy's mother paid the first installment on Bartell's arrogance.

"When's my mom coming to get me?"

She looked around. She heard it clear as day. Vincy's voice when he was young, not so gravelly, not so deep or strained. The fire was closer now. She could see the licking flames at the top of the stairs. The sprinklers had just come on but it was too late. They were frozen up from disuse and the winter and they sputtered pitifully.

She could remember what she told him. She had to tell him that, from then on, he'd be staying with her and Mister Bartell. That an accident happened.

She tried to talk to husband that night, but, he pulled away. They'd always been partners before, but that night, pacing in his study, he had no intention of hearing her out. He had no intention of comforting her. Mrs. Getavo was her friend, but her body hadn't even cooled by the time Bartell was planning another move, planning to use their death as an excuse to start pushing back at the faction he trespassed upon to cause this.

She was glad Mister Bartell was rotting in the ground. She rolled her head to the side. She was, too. Next to him in that hole in the cemetery. Six feet deep. Her body in a coffin. It'd been 15 years, she was probably pretty far gone down there, with her skull opened up and her brain removed to facilitate the scanning process that digitized her.

She'd already been dead for so long. So, so long. She should've just stayed dead. She'd done this to herself, with her plans, her schemes, her gambit to extend her life, when she knew things were going south. She was cold but didn't feel anything and now she was here in this shithole, about to burn again.

At the same time the SUVs first appeared outside Miss Songdog's apartment building, I was getting into Verne's. My old SWAT armor was a tight fit around my shoulders but I'd been in such poor health lately that I could still don it. I spraypainted over the Grey Anchor Metro Police insignia on it. I could feel the bright white POLICE letters burning underneath it, against my chest and on my back.

My coat was over the top of it. It was cold, bitterly so. The SUV barely started. My fingers were freezing to the steering wheel. The thing almost didn't want to move, but I managed to rock it out of the spot it'd been sitting in.

Getting to the dock was tough. The snow was so deep and these tires weren't the right ones for this sort of activity, but it made do. I wasn't planning on driving away, anyway. The rifle I'd taken was strapped across my chest and my revolver sat in its coat pocket. I'd taken the opportunity to liberate some of Verne's extra ammunition from the back of the SUV, and was pleased at the coincidence of his Personal Defense Weapon packing the same kind and caliber magazines as this rifle did. It was only too bad it didn't save him.

One hundred feet from the gate. The place looked abandoned, except for the four or five trucks outside. Even covered in snow I could tell these were the same kind that waylaid me on the way to Port Smith. Two spots were shoveled out earlier and two sets of tracks, deep but fragmented from the severe sea winds and the drifting powder, showed that someone had left recently. I took some of my pick-me-up, and put on my helmet and goggles while I waited to feel it start to burn in.

I had to hope Vincy was still there.

The slope allowed me to build up some good speed. The SUV started going sideways, but that was fine. It plowed right through the gate of the facility and I spun trying to get it to stop. It shook me pretty hard and I felt the thing nearly tip on its side. The windshield was smashed in and the engine choked. I'd torn a chunk of the hood off and slammed into one of the trucks parked in the yard.

I kicked open the door to see one of the PMC guys in a parka had been coming to investigate, holding a shotgun. I lifted the rifle and pushed the barrel through the opaque mess of glass that was the driver's side window. The poor guy was dead before my boots met snow. I tripped in the ice as Verne's SUV was lit up from behind by another fireteam.

I pushed myself up and ran through the snow between two of the trucks, and threw the gun over the hood to brace it as I returned fire. Thumping noises and sharp cracks turned the windows into dust. I had to make the most of the element of surprise. I threw myself through the powdery drift that formed between the trucks and out the other side to fire at a dark shape silhouetted by the light grey of the facility's fence.

Fifty feet to the building. I knew that's where they were. I sprinted across the open ground to run right into a team pushing out the door. I didn't notice any recoil as I held down the trigger and the first man through the door fell forward into the snow and the men behind him jammed themselves against the door.

I was far from home and I was far from any warmth. If I died here, it'd be cold, I'd freeze solid in no time. They'd have to scrape me up out of the ice. I reminded myself that I was doing this for Maggie. I had to. I was doing this for Verne. I was doing this to lash out against the man who killed Jeff. Somewhere along the line, I'd decided it must have been Vincy. As I slammed against the wall and pushed along it toward the open door, I couldn't recall what Jeff's face looked like, I couldn't recall the smell of his cologne. I could only think of Maggie and her flowery, perfumed cigarettes.

I pushed through the door and heavy bullets knocked the wind out of me. My armor took the brunt of it but it didn't make it much easier. I whipped the gun around and bashed a dog in the head to stun him so I could disengage enough to bring the rifle's barrel around and unload it into him. From behind, I felt a strong arm around my neck and I was lifted off my feet. I kicked out and pushed off, but he had ahold of me. I slammed my head against him, feeling and hearing a crunch as the Kevlar busted his nose open.

That was all the edge I needed to lean forward and throw him over my shoulder. I'd feel that in the morning, if I lived to see it. Right now, things weren't looking so good. Gasping for breath, I jammed the rifle barrel up under his chin and held the trigger down for a second.

I made my way through the building and ended up on the second floor. There were a lot less of them than I expected. These guys were sloppy and weren't able to stop me. I was on the second floor, in a hallway, windows all along one side and doors on the other, when a huge dog busted through one and nearly slammed me through the windows. Frozen air and snow rushed into the hall as he snatched the gun out of my hands and threw it away, then dragged me across the floor and slammed me into the wall. I reached up and punched him straight in the face but it didn't seem to do much.

He grabbed my arm and twisted it, and all I could do to keep him from breaking it was to let myself be thrown. I was on the ground and he pulled a shotgun out from behind a door, a semi-automatic with a huge drum. He was between me and my rifle and I was struggling to pull my revolver from my coat. The split seconds were draining through my hands.

His head exploded. Well, that's a little dramatic. Half his head exploded all over the wall. He dropped. From one of the nearby buildings, through the blizzard, I could see a shape on the roof. A sniper in a parka, a rifle, cat ears, platinum blonde hair. Cheri. At first I thought she was here to kill me but she made no motion to do so as I pulled myself up to my feet. She simply waved her hand at me before I heard a blast from some other part of the building and saw a puff of pulverized concrete near her. She quickly turned her rifle to return fire as the building she was on lit up.

I took the shotgun from the dead dog and, panting, continued down the hallway. Fire support was sparing, as they'd seen her and were working to fight her off. I'd searched all through the building and was at the other end. No sign of Vincy. No smell, no sight, no office. I was getting frustrated and I could taste blood in my mouth. My chest was heaving and seizing from the pain, the bruises, the sharp burn. I caught another slug in the chest as I turned the corner. Lead spalling gave me a close shave. I turned the autoshotgun and held the trigger. The hallway was opening up into a receiving area. The warehouse floor was a jungle of tipped shelving and stacked pallets. I could hardly see but for the brief flashes of fire from within.

I pushed out the door into the snow again. There were guys everywhere. Cheri had bugged out, I wasn't getting any more support from her. I was back where I started, in the snow, shooting people I could hardly see. The gun was getting lighter by the second as the ammo was spent. The violent cacophony of the 12 gauge's report was nothing compared to my own heart beating in my ears. I was lost in a featureless void as the snow and the sky and the blizzard all wrapped up in a bubble of grey around me.

Suddenly everything was quiet.

I heard the crunch of snow underfoot behind me.

I turned halfway. Vincy. My target.

His oversized pistol was raised to my head. The chrome gleamed. His parka obscured his face. I jerked but he pulled the trigger too fast.

Lights out.

"This is a fucking mess!" The fox screamed. He pulled the radio off a dead cat and barked into it.

"Where the fuck are you? Is the robot dead yet!?"

There was silence. Nothing. No response. The Private Military Company he'd hired were scattered to the wind. How could a geriatric dog and an outdated puppet destroy a veteran fighting force?

He screamed. He screamed and cursed and kicked the cat's body. He was losing feeling in his toes. His cowboy boots did nothing for the cold. All his planning was coming to nothing. And now, Fran was dead. He must not've read the letter. He must not've got the memo. That disgusting fucking doppelganger doll must have got something in his head, just like she'd gotten something in Verne's head.

Verne, the poor bastard. If only he'd cooperated. He'd always been loyal to Maggie. How could he not see that Maggie was dead, and that thing, that terrible thing wasn't really her? It didn't deserve her revenge, whether or not a machine could be a person. It didn't deserve to mantle her identity. It was not Maggie Bartell.

There were still a few men left from the PMC. They stepped out of the building, shaken up. Vincy's snout wrinkled as he cursed.

"For fuck's sake, get this mess cleaned up and get over there to deal with the robot!"

He stomped off. Across the street from the pier was the old mall. He had a cozy setup in there, where the power was still on, and he could have a little warmth, and he could sit alone and think about his next move.

I was numb. The air in my nose was sharp. I felt like I was suspended, floating in nothing, laying on my chest. I opened my eyes just a little and I couldn't see anything but white. Otherwise, I could hardly move.

A blurry shape was moving out of the chill. A sandy beige, a woman in a flowing blue dress. As she approached I saw the long milk-chocolate tresses of her shiny, curly hair. Her eyes were calm. She looked like she did fifteen years ago. She looked like a woman out of time.

A smile was across her face. Fur. Flesh. Skin. Soft black lips. Amber eyes with big, round, dark pupils. It was cold but she didn't mind it. She was an angel.

She laid down in the snow next to me, leaning over on her chest. She looked at me. Tears were welling up in my eyes and freezing.

"You're a little rough around the edges, honey."

"Maggie... I'm sorry."

"Hush, just relax. Do you remember?" She pulled my helmet off. She pulled the goggles off my face.

I choked out her name again.

“Doesn’t this remind you of that fall? We went out to the hobby farm, the place I inherited from my parents. Out there in the woods? We saddled up two horses. The sky was big and blue. We had a picnic on that hill, we always called it Horse Heaven growing up. You could see the wind turbines above the trees and just watch them lazily turn. Then there was the worst winter in ten years, but we made do and had a good time. Mister Bartell never knew.”

I tried to lift my head. I tried to move towards her. Her hand was warm on my snout, on my chin.

“Oh, Fran, I miss you,” she continued. “I waited a long time.”

“I didn’t want it to be like this,” I managed to say.

“I didn’t either. I don’t want it to be this way, either. Can you do something for me, Fran? I know you’re tired and you want to rest, but... Let’s have at least one more dance.”

“One more?”

“Come on, Fran. Stand up and let’s have at least one more dance.”

“Okay.”

I could move. I pushed myself up out of the snow. My head was pounding. Blood was leaking down the side of my face and was freezing. The tears in the corners of my eyes were ice. My toes and fingers and the tip of my tail and nose burned.

I stood up. Maggie was gone. It was like a dream. There was no imprint of her in the snow next to me. I stood up, and looked around, and three of those PMC boys were looking at me. They didn’t move. They didn’t reach for their guns. They just stared at me. I looked down at my helmet on the ground, and saw the rough feathery-edged dent in it.

I started walking. The mall. Vincy. That was all that was in my head. They didn’t try to stop me. At least one more dance, Maggie. I can do that for you.