

Vincy sat alone in his office at the front of the abandoned mall.

I sat alone in my office at the front of the abandoned mall.

My gun was on the desk. Papers were spread out in front of me. I'd shucked off my parka and it was draped over the chair behind me. The heater was running. I was pouring over folders I'd taken from Jeff's apartment months ago. The poodle's file was in the trash. I didn't need it anymore.

Still no response from the team that went to kill the Synth. Nothing. Money didn't mean anything anymore. I'd poured a hundred thousand dollars into this PMC to keep them up on this. I'd gotten them drugs, I'd fanned the flames of their desires for revenge for their fallen comrades, but it was all for nothing. She must have killed the whole team. I'd... I'd have to go make sure, myself. Hopefully, they'd at least have brought her down with them.

I loaded another 50 caliber bullet into the magazine to replace the one I'd spent on the poodle, and set it by the gun. I was losing it. The words were spinning together. I couldn't read them anymore. I pulled over a little mirror and started to fix myself up a line to steady myself.

Just as I finished one, the door slammed open.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

Fran was standing in the doorway, half his face caked with blood, ice clinging to his fur and his jacket. He was holding a revolver.

Back from the dead.

I pushed myself up to my feet.

"Van Grantze!"

He lifted the revolver. He was unsteady. I was frozen in place. I reached for my gun but I hadn't reinserted the magazine.

I could see down the barrel. Neon light flickered behind me. The mall still had power. Antique lightboxes and their outdated advertisements lined every hallway. I looked to my right. The door was there. I could try and make it.

He pulled the trigger. The bullet flew through the air at 800 feet per second. It hit the front of the desk and blew through it and burrowed through my thigh and hit the lightbox behind me, shattering it. I looked down at the wound, then back up. I lifted the gun with the single round in the chamber and fired it, causing him to duck, and that was my chance to run. I dropped it. I was out the door.

It was colder out in the mall. Snow was built up on the tiles, as the skylights had long ago fallen out. The place was thoroughly looted and the long hallway was only lit by the billboards. It was too dark outside for the blown-out skylights to really be of any good.

I was clutching my leg. I was losing blood fast. The coke wasn't helping. My heart was running away on me and my teeth were freezing as I panted. I turned around and saw he was holding my gun. I'd left the magazine there on the desk. He fired at me and the bullet tore through my chest. I ducked around the corner. I lost him for just a second, but I was hurt.

Now in a tighter, darker hallway, there was nowhere left to go. I had never felt this way before. I'd never felt my blood pouring out with every heartbeat, my muscles severed by the force of the impact, my organs stuttering from the hydrostatic shock. I fell against a lightbox and my blood splattered onto it. My hand smeared it across the dusty plastic covering it as I tried to pull myself along. I was faint. Things didn't look right.

My life wasn't mine and I knew that. Maggie was right. The past was a yawning maw. I could see it laid out in front of me. It was gaping, toothy, looking to swallow everything up. I was standing on the edge, about the fall in. I'd never belonged to anyone but Maggie. My own parents hadn't made as much of an impact in my life as she did. She raised me, she brought me into the family business, and then she disappeared. I thought I was free and I was fine to live a rough life on the streets and in the system and then that doll appeared. The doll that claimed to be Maggie. I was so desperate and needed to believe her. It took me over a decade to learn the truth, and now she was killing me, she was having her hound kill me, because I'd strayed.

Maybe I should've been more loyal. Maybe, that thing was some sort of shadow of Maggie after all.

I looked behind me, and there he was again. He was limping, too, and holding his own chest. His eyes were big and blank and behind him I could see her. Her. The doll. Like some grisly god of death, six arms above her head and each holding an instrument of death. She was sending him to take my soul, I was being dragged into hell.

I tried to limp away but my legs weren't working, they were too cold, I was too cold, my soul was pouring out of my body and my hands couldn't keep it in and they were slick with cold blood and I tried to wipe my face but it just caked the blood on deeper.

Fran was suddenly pushing me against the lightbox and holding me up. He was strong, his hand around my neck was strong, he was made of iron, I couldn't fight, I was limp in his grip like a puppy.

He raised the gun to my head and I saw the sight that was the last thing so many people ever saw. The gaping yawning barrel was the past, the past was the gaping, yawning maw of my gun. I was always on the other side of it but I'd never thought it was like this. It was terrifying. Deep inside that steel well there lived a creature that would put me out like a candle and I'd never be brought back or relit.

I tried to make a noise with my mouth. The last thing I could do, I didn't think it would spare me, but he deserved to know. All this was because of Jeff. Jeff Decouier the information merchant. Jeff Decouier was the cause of everything and if this old dog was willing to do this then he deserved to know. I wrote it on the letter, but I had to try and tell him.

I choked it out.

"I know... I know who killed Jeff Decouier!"

"You don't know shit," he retorted, his voice a rasp in my ears. He shoved the massive compensator of the gun into my mouth.

No, I couldn't tell him. I was going to die. It was cold and dark and he was the only one who'd know. I was going to die and he was going to kill me. My own gun. Synth killed Jeff Decouier! Synth did it! It's in the letter! Maybe he'll read it, maybe things can still be right even if I'm dead. I just want to tell him. I just need one more ragged breath. I need one more, please, that's all I need. I just need one more heartbeat I just need one more breath I don't even want the pain to stop I'm okay with the pain I just----

I was holding Vincy up against the shining, glitching digital billboard. His blood was smeared over it. I held his own heavy gun up under his chin. He was panicking and twitching. He was gasping nonsense and weakly, feebly holding onto my arm.

"I know... I know who killed Jeff Decouier!"

This was it. That's what I wanted to know all this time. That's the answer to the question that started this months-long living nightmare. The name of the person who killed Jeff Decouier. That's how Miss Songdog got me to work for her. That's how I got involved with the Koreans. That's why I cut a bloody swathe through the criminal underground of Grey Anchor.

The name of the man who killed the man I loved. It was so close to me again, like the time I'd held that cat against the wall. This time it was Vincy against the wall, as he struggled, his blood draining fast. Even if he told me he'd die. There was no way he'd live through these wounds without medical treatment.

I didn't even know if I wanted it anymore. I had Maggie back. I'd learned Jeff had been selling us out the whole time. He'd planned to sell me out to Mister Bartell, for what, a little bit of money? And I didn't even remember his face, or his smell. How could I have loved him? How did I let that happen? All along, he was ready to throw me under the bus should anyone so much as brush against him too hard.

Jeff Decouier was a piece of shit.

I didn't care who killed him.

"You don't know shit."

I pulled the trigger and the massive pistol did its work.

Vincy's head was... Well, it wasn't much of one anymore. The compensator was in his mouth, and those expanding gases that mitigated the recoil did a real number on his snout. Most of his face was okay but the entire back of his head was gone, just splattered all over the screen, a gaping mess. I dropped him to the ground.

It was finally over.

Vincy Getavo was dead.

I stuffed his gun into my belt, and sat down in the snow. It was still tough to breath, but I was going to live. The men he was paying to kill me were blown to the wind like so much snow. His plans were up there, dripping down the wall.

I sat there for what felt like a long time staring at him. Eventually, I fished his phone out of his jacket pocket. Maybe it had something useful in it. Maybe I could use it.

I looked back at him. I couldn't just leave him here. I had to drag his corpse off. The waterworks under the mall was a place no one would look, and there was a drainage pipe in there just the proper size to stuff him into, although doubled over. That was it. I left him there to rot.

There was something in the pit of my stomach and I knew I had to make it back to Miss Songdog's. By the time I was back out on the surface, all that was left was the wreck of Verne's SUV and the row of lifted trucks. The snow was so high by then that I wasn't even sure if one of those would make it, but I managed to get it started and get the heater going.

I knew something was wrong as I approached the street. I could see the snow lit up, I could see an SUV in front of the apartment. I could see the top three floors of the building were on fire. No fire department on the scene. No one but me.

The door was busted in and snow was built up inside the first floor. The air was rank with blood and smoke. "Maggie!" I cried out her name. I started up the stairs to her apartment.

She jolted awake. Synths don't sleep and they don't dream, but she jolted awake. She was wreathed in fire and the hallway and the stairs were an inferno. WARNING: EXCESSIVE TEMPERATURE scrolled across her vision along with static. Fire. She had to be awake for this one, too, didn't she? The first one wasn't good enough, was it? At least this one would hurt less.

"Maggie!" Fran's voice was far off. She must be hallucinating. It must be cooking her wiring. So that's what it was like to die as a machine.

"Maggie!" A shape in the smoke. Tall, dark, handsome. So that's what Death looked like, she thought to herself, it wore a familiar form.

I knelt down beside her.

"Maggie..." I put my hand on her. She was hot, I was panting, she was hot to the touch, her dress caught an ember and I had to stomp it out. She was damaged badly but I was not technician. She rolled her eyes up to look at me.

"Fran... You came to see me off. I'm so glad I get to see you one last time."

"Yeah, you better get used to it, because you're going to have to keep seeing my ugly mug for a while now."

"What do you mean? Everyone... Everyone's dead."

"Not everyone. You and me, we're still alive." I wrapped my arms around her to hoist her up. She must not have been able to move much. She was limp like a puppet in my arms.

"What? This... This is real?"

I pulled her down the stairs as the building rumbled. It was about to collapse on the top floor.

"It sure is real, baby. It sure is real."

We were out in the cold again and I hoisted her into the truck. I didn't know where to start, but she was alive, and I was alive, and we had to keep going. She sat slumped in the passenger seat, looking up at me.

"Mechanic, doctor, whoever. We need to see them," I said.

She made a sighing sound. "I guess... I guess this is real. I guess you saved my life."

"We need to get you fixed up. I could use a patch or two, myself."

"Alright. Here, go to 51st street..."