

Stippled Shadows

A slow pan out from the pixelized glow of a television reveals a woman in blue behind a podium. The current mayor was up for reelection in 19XX and was giving her campaign speech. “The districts of Neyokeo and Jokkaido need the strong leadership my administration has offered this city. Reelect Mayor Togé to finish the job!” The digital portal imploded on itself and the light from the TV shimmered out in an event horizon as I pressed the power button on my remote. “The last thing we need is more of the same in this god-forsaken city...” I mumbled under my breath pulling off my soaking long brown trench coat. I can’t afford to leave the TV on again... Rates are getting way too high... I sat down in my chair at the edge of my desk and spun around looking at the rustic old ceiling. Things had gotten quiet at the office as of late. Any more of this worrying peace and I won’t be able to make ends meet. Reaching into the pocket of my shirt I pulled out a pack of Lucky’s. I could really use a smoke... In the dim room, the faint glow of a cigarette illuminates my reflection in the window of a rain-swept city. A plume of industry still lingered late into the night and swirled around the acidic rain burning the filthy streets. Regardless of the fury of the heavens, neither He nor I could clean those streets. As I reached for another sip of the whiskey I poured myself, I hesitated and pondered the white noise of that fury and prayed that He would not resort to fire before my time was up. I took a sip and eased my recline as I heard a knock at the door.

She entered.

Only a small, accentuated lamp by my desk illuminated the room draped in shading. Soaked by the acid rain, they entered. A tall woman with sleek long hair dark in tone and a figure that could stop traffic. Accompanied by a shadowy figure in a pitch-black suit wearing a colorless mask,

shapeless and smooth. He was brandishing a shimmering dark chrome katana on his hip. It was clear she was wealthy if the personal guard didn't tip you off from 50 yards. Despite her inky stippled coat, you could make out the hues of her bright red hooded dress underneath.

"Have a seat," I said to her. She, silently still, took a seat and her company stood tall behind her. Taking a closer look, I noticed the colorless mask he was wearing was like that of a porcelain doll.

"I have a job for you, Mr. Samuels," she said to me. She hesitated and looked suspiciously around the room. "But... before I share anymore, I need your word that you will not share any of this with the police." Her company seemed to glare at me from behind his mask viciously but was calmed by her disapproving glance.

"I keep all of my client's business private I assure you miss—?"

"*Ms. Hana,*" she corrected.

"Ms. Hana, I give you, my word," I replied clasping my hands together across my desk. She continued in an uncomfortable tone, "I believe my husband was murdered. He...He was a leader of the Yakuza...I'm not sure who I can trust right—"

I interrupted her saying, "Look. I've had many tough customers lady, but I've never had to deal with the Yakuza. I know what happens when you get mixed up in their affairs!" She was caught off guard by my words and her gaze lowered to the floor despairingly.

"I have no one else to turn to... The police won't help me, and I can't trust anyone in the Yakuza right now."

"Do you think they may have something to do with your husband's death?"

"I'm not sure all I knew was my husband was secretive about the business," she sniffled.

"...When did you find out your husband was murdered?" I added.

“I saw him last night. I found him lying dead at the hotel with the most horrifying expression still etched on his face. I immediately fled and spent the night in hiding.”

I interjected again saying, “You mean this happened all very recently?”

She slowly nodded and continued saying, “I’ve heard people say you were the best P.I. in Jekkaido. Willing to take on even the *toughest* cases...” She emphasized the word toughest. I knew she was trying to butter me up by saying that, but it was true; I was the best P.I. in this hellhole.

I stood up from my chair grumbling, “I don’t know where you heard that...I just haven’t had any complaints is all...You mentioned a hotel?” Looking into the basket she held in her lap she pulled out a bright white card with a golden flower on it.

“This is the place, it’s all on this card.” I took it in my hands and held it up to the light brushing my fingers across its edges like a razor blade. Hotel Ritsu in gold leaf was broadly printed across the card with its number and address in smaller print below.

“Neyokeo, 50 Central South.” On the other side were the room number and a small flower pattern. “Room 413.” I placed the sharp-edged card in my pocket. I paced a bit then looked out a window peering through some blinds. I saw a figure in a suit standing in the rain staring at me with a pitch-black umbrella and—”

“Will you help me, Mr. Samuels?” She impatiently spoke. I looked back towards her and saw her fee in cash already laid on the table. She clearly was in a hurry.

“If I have additional questions for you, how can I reach you?” She pulled a notecard out of her bag and wrote down a number hurriedly in messy ink.

“I’ll be staying here for a couple of days while I’m still in the city. Just ask for a Mr. Saturn, the big guy will be answering for me.” She gestured to her escort towering behind her. I

had my doubts about taking a case like this but the look in her eyes and the generous sum convinced me to take the case.

“Thanks...” I hesitated for a moment and continued. “I’ll see what I can do, I’ll start by checking the hotel you mentioned.” A small grin of appreciation appeared on her face.

“Thank you I hope to hear from you soon when you find something,” taking her purse into both her hands, she stood up and her escort opened the office door for her. I noticed a tattoo of a flower on her right ankle as she walked out. The man in the colorless mask looked back at me cautiously. He hadn’t said a word the whole time he was here until just now. “Be careful.” He said to me then they left. I stood there and the weight of what I had just agreed to was slowly pushing down on me. I was always one to go looking for trouble and I had a bad habit of finding it. However, a part of me felt like I couldn’t turn her down no matter what she may have asked of me. I heard a single drop in the quiet room. I looked down at the pain coming from my bleeding finger and the paper bills on the table soaking up the red.

That card was sharper than it looked.

I grabbed my things, slipped into my trench coat, and fixed my fedora low on my brow. A crosshatch of shade obscured my face underneath its wide brim. The rain washed away all my sense of self as I delved back into the clutches of the dark system. That system offered me transport in bright yellow at the edge of the road. Behind the wheel was just another shadow, but I couldn’t remember if I hailed for him or if he was waiting for me. I wasn’t given a moment to think as the menacing rain raced me into it. The loud outpour of heaven and the crashing of the street were quieted by the interior and the distorted digital tone of smooth jazz playing on the

radio. The shadow's master turned towards me sharply, only faintly back-lit by the bright red meter on the dash.

"Where tooo sir?" they whistled.

"50 Central South."

"Ahhh, dah Ritsoo."

"Yeah, that's the one..."

The entity turned away and we departed. I looked out the window at the passing city before me. I flickered my lighter in the bumpy backseat of that cab trying to have another quick smoke. When the driver noticed in the rear-view mirror, he scolded me saying in a rough voice.

"If yooo wanna have a smoke holdit outdah winduh for god's sakes."

I cracked open the car window unleashing the torrential sound of the rain for a few moments. Each pull seemed to ease my burden and carry the heavy chains the city put on me. I pondered that view. As we crossed over the river into the next district, an ink-soaked full-page spread of a city skyline sketched across the view from the window. Neyokeo was a place spilling over with culture and ideas for a better tomorrow that always seemed to ruin the here and now. A bustling city of neon, concrete, and chrome full of more moral pitfalls than potholes. I turned my back to the city and pulled the card out of my pocket. Some things already weren't adding up in my mind regarding this case. What about the body? Surely, hotel staff or the police would have discovered it by now... I was admittedly a little suspicious of the woman, but I wasn't one to ask too many questions. I knew when to ask questions and when not to. Deep I spaced out in thought. The radio felt like it began growing louder and louder as we approached the city. While bass and piano kept time, a saxophone quietly and meticulously began echoing at a steady pace filling my hollow soul. Rough streets wore against the tires of that old cab while the rain hummed in the

backdrop of my mind. Deeper into the abyss, shadowy figures appeared all over with bright white umbrellas. I knew this meant we had just passed downtown. At the edge of Central stood a large Gothic structure from an older period. The Ritsu hotel was a prominent historical residence of Neyokeo. A neon sign written in another language hung on the side and glowed a neon purple. I exited the cab standing at the edge of the sidewalk seeing off the cab driver with both of my hands in my coat. The rain continued beating me as I looked to the lonely entrance.

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The Gothic features of the hotel gave it this imposing look contrasted especially by the chrome and neon of the new buildings in the city. It was one of the few concrete and stone structures unaffected by the large fire that broke out downtown many years ago.

I entered.

The oppressive atmosphere outside melted away like the rain dripping off my coat across the marbled floors. The clerk at the front desk greeted me and I flashed the card I received at her asking for the key to 413. She was in a royal purple uniform with gold accents reminiscent of the sign and the card I gathered. The clerk hesitated before handing it over, looking around the room nervously as if the devil was about to jump her at any moment. I took the chrome elevator up to the fourth floor and the elevator jingled a loud dinging sound once it arrived. The doors clinked open, and, in the hallway, I saw a room placard. “401 – 412 and 414 – 425”. Odd, twelve rooms at each end but no sign of room 413. Looking more closely at the card I noticed an asterisk at the bottom corner of the card nearly out of view. It looked familiar but I couldn’t recall where I’d seen it before. The elevator? I re-entered the elevator and looked closely around the control panel and noticed the same icons as a pattern around the buttons. One asterisk by the fourth-floor button had a small cutout around it. I pressed it, and the back of the elevator slowly unraveled

behind me. This was a little unnerving I thought. At the end of a strange dimly lit hallway was a single door labeled 413. To my sudden surprise, as I inserted the key, the door creaked swinging open gently. No need for the key. The door to the room was suspiciously ajar. In shock, I found the room strangely untouched and the body on the floor. She wasn't lying; he had an expression of horror still lingering on his face. Looking around I noticed more details about the room. It wasn't your typical hotel room in fact it resembled more of a conference room. It had a living room and kitchenette by the front door however behind another door to the right was a long conference room with many chairs and a long oval-shaped table in the middle. Above the center chair at the end of the table hung a large golden katana with a white floral pattern on the sheath. In the corner of the living room, was the corpse of Mr. Hana. I cautiously searched around the room in case any evil may have been hiding. After I felt the room was secured, I went back to examine the body more closely. I searched through his suitcoat and his pockets, finding some loose change, a pocketknife, and a strange-looking key. Around his waist peeling back his suitcoat, I found a 9mm handgun. The clip was empty but there was one bullet remaining in the chamber. The barrel had a lingering scent of gunpowder still present. Curious, I didn't notice any signs of a struggle in the room or any bullet holes from gunshots. I checked around Mr. Hana's body and found no bullet wounds either. Fidgeting with the key in my hand, I decided to take a closer look. It was the type made to open a briefcase. I searched around the room more thoroughly to see if a case was in the room. I even checked the pullout mattress of the sofa. Strangely, I found the mysterious case hidden inside the folds of the mattress. Clever but odd hiding spot for a briefcase I thought to myself. Laying the briefcase on the small coffee table by the sofa, I carefully inserted the key and opened the briefcase. I saw a bunch of official-looking documents redacted with thick ink, a small bag of a white substance, and several explicit

photographs depicting—. Suddenly, like a tornado warning, I heard the echoing ding of the elevator and the clink of its chrome doors opening. I quietly slammed the case shut and locked it turning my head towards the door. My breath was silenced.

Someone was coming...

I dashed to the edge of the room as quietly and swiftly as I could with the briefcase still in hand. I panned to the left and back to the right rapidly looking for a hiding place. I took the door on my immediate left and found myself in a small dark bathroom with a shower tub and a small sink. I closed the door gently behind me and kept the lights off. The low rhythmic thud of large footsteps approached closer and closer. The shade entered. I didn't risk seeing who it may resemble for fear of being discovered. Questions of who it could be raced through my mind, but I wasn't going to risk finding out right now. I heard crashes and clangs from the main room sounding like the room was being tossed around by a poltergeist. They were looking for something... I slowly backed up into the bathtub shower standing behind the curtain. I reached for my revolver hanging around my side holster when the adrenaline began boiling over; just in case the shade was to phase through the wall. After a few moments, I heard the room phone picked up on the other side of the wall. There was a short dial tone and then a low ghastly voice.

"Hello? Yes. I would like to request cleaning for 413."

The phone clicked. The rustling of a large bag could be heard and then the slow ring of a zipper struggling to close. The low rhythmic footsteps then continued out of the room with the sound of the door closing soundly behind. The shade had come and gone like a ghost. My heart was still racing. A small pool of sweat formed at the top of my brow hovering on the brim of my fedora. I took off my hat with one hand and used my arm to wipe the sweat off my brow. I had to reenter

the room and leave before room service arrived. My jaw dropped and I stood there thoughts racing in complete and utter shock.

The body was gone.

I quickly took the briefcase in my hand and hid the key in my shoe. I then ran into the hallway. I stopped myself from using the elevator and found a nearby fire exit. I descended each floor rapidly until finding myself at some sort of back exit in the middle of an alleyway. The rain had calmed into a hazy dripping mist dampening the dark twisted alleyway I had found myself in. I walked down the long dark still tense, so I pulled out another smoke to help calm the nerves a bit. I was slowly forgetting the city as I kept walking but suddenly, I felt this dark presence watching me. Was I being tailed? I wondered. I kept pace and took a turn around one alley and down the next quickening my pace every few seconds. Abruptly, I found myself at a dead end with nowhere left to run. A chill of suspense crept down my spine, but bravely I turned to confront the one tailing me clutching the briefcase firmly in my hands.

“Who are you and what do you want!?” I shouted.

He had an inky black suit and a matching black umbrella and wore a colorless mask, shapeless and smooth. Like a cornered animal, I began to fight. I threw my cigarette down by their feet. In a declaration of war, they stomped out the faint light as they approached me closer. I didn't know who they were, but I didn't feel like hearing them out. The first swing I delivered in spades, knocking the umbrella out of their hand, splashing down falling into a puddle. The entire fight scene between me and the figure in the mask danced in the ripple distorted reflection of the puddles splintered on the asphalt. If not for the dim lighting of back-alley lamps and stark hues of neon signs the action unfolding would have been imperceptible. It was like looking at the

world through a broken mirror. Each crashing step against the puddles and against each other was like the frantic drumming of a rag-time band. After some back and forth I delivered an excellent right hook right across the figure's mask shattering it against my fist and in one smooth motion grabbed him by the collar. His body lay bloodied, and limp, but still conscious. A blindingly bright light appeared before me. Bathed in light I held my stalker by his collar with one hand and shielded my eyes from the light with the other. Things were quickly going from bad to worse. Not long after being cornered by this figure, a whole gang of slim black cars rolled up from the edge of the darkness, and out stepped more goons wearing colorless masks. Without hesitation, they drew weapons waiting for orders. That's when trouble emerged wearing another colorless white mask and brandishing a bleached katana on his hip. However, upon closer inspection, this mask was like the face of a wolf. There must've been some sort of status wrapped up in this since all but one of the masks was plain like a porcelain doll. As these things raced through my mind, he howled at me.

"I know who you are *Mr. Samuels* but you do not understand who *we* are, do you?"

"I think you may be with the Yakuza! Am I right?!" I grunted under my quickened breath and released the goon I held by the collar. He slumped over into a puddle on the asphalt.

"Yes, very much correct *Mr. Samuels*," He replied in a pompous growling tone. "Throw *us* your handgun...*detective*," he snarled. I slowly took my gun from under my coat and begrudgingly tossed it to his feet. He kicked it behind him as he continued approaching.

"*We* know you were in contact with a woman in a red dress being escorted by one who looked like one of my colleagues here. *We* are looking for her, you are going to tell us where she is hiding."

“...and...what if I don’t?” I said while sniffing from the cold wiping off the blood running down from my nose.

“I’ll personally ensure you have a *slow painful death*.”

“...and...what if I do?” I replied slowly.

“I might reconsider *killing you*,” he finished his words with a small, contorted smile on his face baring his fangs.

“So much for choices...” I mumbled to myself quietly.

I was surrounded with no chance of escape. I had no choice but to comply with them. I had no idea why they were looking for the woman, but I figured I may be able to delay them by cooperating.

“*Bring him*,” he growled at his henchman commanding coldly.

They rushed at me beating me senselessly and then taking my bruised and battered body up by the arms they dragged me into the back of one of their black vehicles and put a bag over my head. I had no idea where I was or where I was going but I did know one thing.

I was in way too deep.

My hands were bound, and I was placed on a metal stool and the bag was lifted from my head. My eyes strained to see in the darkness and then a bright light was placed on me. I was bruised and beaten but they clearly had more to say. At the edge of the darkness, I could make out some figures watching me. One of them rose from their chair and slowly walked towards me. The distinct sound of high heels on concrete echoed in what appeared to be an abandoned warehouse. It was a woman in a stippled black and white spotted coat barely hiding the hues of a blue dress underneath. She had short black hair with a figure that could stop hearts. The striking

and familiar features she had I've seen somewhere. A chill went up my spine when it dawned on me. She was either the devil incarnate or the mayor who was up for reelection-Madam Togé. She interrupted my thoughts in an icy calm calculated voice. *"Mr. Samuels, I presume? I don't think we have met yet but I'm sure the pleasure is all yours hmm? I heard you did some digging and found an old bag I had lost!"* She exaggeratedly said while picking up the black briefcase I had found close to Mr. Hana's body.

"I was losing sleep over this little thing y'know."

She paced around in a circle. Her coat hung down from her arms revealing her blue open-back dress. I could make out the inked etching of a black dragon on her back.

"What's in it? What does it have to do with all of you?" I barely panted from the depths of my beaten chest.

She turned back towards me sharply saying, *"You sure do ask a lot of questions. I guess it's in the job description...It's best if you never know, in fact, no one will. I can't open it without the key to show you anyways."* She then handed it to one of those masked goons. *"Dispose of it."* She then turned back to me with her piercing gray eyes. *"I'm feeling generous, I'm going to let you go. you won't pose any threat to us anymore."* She snapped her fingers and slipped back into the dark void she had emerged from. I couldn't tell if those cold words were a threat or a promise. Escorted into another car where I was bagged again and taken to the outskirts of the city. They untied me, threw me out onto the rough dirty asphalt, and drove off leaving me in the oily smoke of pollution. I saw the city light up like a million bokeh lights as I stood in the dark by the festering landfills at the edge of the city. I was lucky to have gotten away with my life. I appreciated the mayor's policy on this matter but let's just say I won't be voting for her come election time. I walked to a nearby pay phone and tried to call the number Ms. Hana gave me.

When I asked for Mr. Saturn, I was transferred to another line with only a dial tone that ended with the sharp static of failure. I was too late. Either she was gone, or someone had gotten to her before I did. This was the lowest point of my life and then the rain started up again. I solemnly trudged back into the city soaking up the rain, the filth, and the neon lights, clinging to my dirtied fedora. Only the faint glow of the cigarette in my mouth filled me with the warmth of life. I hailed a cab and returned to find my office torn up. It was tossed and my desk was flipped over contents spilling out. The leather chair I loved was crumpled, knocked over, and leaning against the broken window. It was a threat and a reminder to not go looking for trouble. Bad habits are hard to break I'm learning. Alone, soaked in the dark office I prayed that He would rain fire and vengeance down upon the city consuming it along with me in righteous indignation.

Only then could my soul find peace.