

## INTERLOPER

Rondo was a contract engineer at the height of his career. While he was technically freelance, the heads at KAISO seemed to favour him greatly. He always had some kind of project to keep him busy and was paid handsomely for his efforts. KAISO's never ending urban expansion of the Mishima prefecture provided him a never ending supply of work. He was content with his life amidst the endless sonance of the megacity, and took great pride in his achievements. So naturally, today was to be his last day of normalcy if not existence altogether.

He rose from a brief sleep at sunrise, his alarm clock vibrating softly, and began his morning routine; miso soup while browsing the internet forums for anything that piqued his interests. His apartment was a hushed sanctuary from the encroaching chaos outside. He benefited greatly from a high rise spot, far from the barrage of noise the streets emitted, yet not high enough to see the dull skies. The lack of anyone to share the apartment with made every room feel twice as large. Growing bored of his surroundings, he decided it was time to leave the apartment.

Minutes later at the base of the building, Rondo emerged. He wore a chequered suit and a matching hat which poorly complimented his messy hair. He took pride in sticking out like a sore thumb, dressing old fashioned just for the sake of it. Fiddling with his keys, he patrolled around the building block to his usual parking spot. A privilege fit only for some. His car was a dim brown four-door coupe. He could afford to make himself stand out but his car would have to make do with fitting in. He checked his watch as he took his seat. Currently he was an hour ahead of schedule should he not delay things further. Rondo hesitated for a spell before deciding that showing up early wasn't the worst idea.

Driving through the hastily planned streets of Mishima was always something of a challenge but the sights made it worthwhile. The towering buildings of all shapes and sizes, no two matching their neighbour, each housing dozens of denizens or a handful of stores and restaurants. These particular streets were unkempt. Looking to the skies, the dishevelled nature of the buildings would fool the eyes into believing they could collapse any minute. Contrasting to the ageing buildings, bright and sleek advertisement displays remained in near pristine condition. It remained a sight Rondo considered an acquired taste, a taste he had whether he liked it or not.

Traffic began to clear up the further he strayed from the high-rises. Eventually making his way to the outer districts, the sky was more visible and the streets less claustrophobic. Said districts had far less people around, some areas practically abandoned by all except whatever businesses remained entombed there. Rondo pulled to a stop at a red light. The bright pale sky forced his eyes to a squint and he put on his sunglasses. They looked just like regular glasses only they had a dark, tinted protective layer inside the glass. He paid handsomely for such a service and yet probably could have gotten it done for dirt cheap had he frugality in mind. The light remained red for what felt like an eternity. Rondo checked his watch impatiently, not sure how long had passed. Nobody was even at the traffic light. He swore he hadn't seen anyone around for the last 3 blocks. Rondo returned his hands to the wheel and let out a tired sigh. His eyes perked up once he heard something other than his car's low rumble. He could hear footsteps thumping faintly in the distance, getting closer. Before he could concentrate on what he was hearing, the light finally flicked from red to green and his attention returned to the road.

That attention was not held long. Rondo's hearing kicked back in just as a figure charged into one of the back doors of the car. The rear passenger door swung open and a man dived into the rear seat, opposite the open door.

"Come on, quickly!" Hushed the seated figure to something beyond the door.

Rondo sat visibly confused and wildly alarmed at whatever the hell was going on behind him, yet anxiously struggled to turn around to his newfound passenger. A few more footsteps later, a second guest arrived to the rear seats, this one in slightly less of a hurry, opting to simply sit in the seat as opposed to diving into it.

Rondo finally stacked up the courage to turn around only to be met face first with the muzzle of a pistol. Stunned, he flicked his eyes left and right to catch a glimpse of both passengers. On the right sat the man that first arrived. He wore a mishmash of heavy clothing with muted colours. The only sign of personality was his long, black beard poking out over his free hand. He was hunched over, clutching his gut from a visible wound. His other hand held a shiny, old-fashioned pistol pointed directly into the face of Rondo. The second passenger had a more upright figure however they were entirely covered in clothing. Not a beard nor eye dared reveal itself. Their lower face was concealed by a grey scarf harnessed together by a disposable mask, while black sunglasses and a hat covered their upper features. They stared Rondo down with a single finger over their mask in a *hush* motion.

The man with the gun began to aggressively examine his surroundings in the car, his bloody hand staining the plastic. First he checked the back of the driver's seat, then under the seats and ultimately the lighting fixture above his head. He pulled the plastic light fitting from the ceiling and clumsily pulled out something resembling a watch battery. Pulling the window down an inch, he tossed it out and returned his hand to clutch his stomach once more.

"Drive." the stranger growled as he readjusted his iron sights to Rondo's head

Rondo turned back to the road and casually drove in the general direction of "forward", cruising through a now red light. Glancing at the mirror, he noticed the two struggling with the man's wound in the back.

The second passenger twitched into action, pulling a bag from their back and ripping it open. Their free hand dived into the bag pulling out various supplies and food. They held each item up for the first passenger to see, only to be met with a denial, tossing it back in. Eventually they managed to pull a small, unlabelled spray can which was met with approval from the other passenger. The man pulled up his clothing somewhat to reveal a gaping wound, rapidly pouring blood. By the second, he was visibly draining in colour. The second passenger aimed at the wound and sprayed a red mist onto it, abruptly stopping in shock at the man's howling. Growing impatient, he then yanked the can from the other passenger and sprayed it onto himself once again, this time gritting his teeth through the pain. Rondo spent the entire time, eyes bulging out of his head, doing his best to look forward and nowhere else.

The man's pained groans subsided and the mood remained awkwardly quiet. Rondo didn't know where to go so he just brought them in a loop around the next district. He wanted to ask where they needed to go, in an attempt to end this episode, but he also wanted to keep the back of his head free from bullet-holes. The man looked at the passenger and tapped his ear three times. The passenger swiftly pulled a phone from the bag and handed it to him. There were a few button clicks followed by a brief silence and suddenly he was talking in a hushed manner. "It's Vince...No...We were seen, I think they sold us out"

His tone changed.

"What do you think happened!...We're stuck in the back of a car...Yeah she's still here...Just give me the next spot...Alright."

Leaning back in the seat, he tossed the phone to his side and looked solemnly out the window.

"There's a white building behind the Level building in the Hanwa District. She needs to get there." Vince croaked.

Rondo felt like this was his chance for something of an answer.

"Should I ask why?"

Vince held a pause until finally responding, the window still having his attention.

"Would anyone miss you, should you die?"

Rondo quickly remembered that any minute could be his last as long as these two were in the back. Deciding that getting out of this alive was in his best interest, he didn't answer.

"That wasn't rhetorical" confirmed Vince.

"Well shit" mumbled Rondo, cursing his own curiosity.

He wanted to say "Oh of course" until he thought about it. What would happen were he to die here and now? Someone would possibly find his corpse and confirm him as absolutely dead. He would be taken to the morgue and they would ask someone of relation to confirm the body. They wouldn't get his parent's, they're both gone. He had no siblings, no wife, no kids. The next thing would be close friends but he couldn't even *think* of any. No one ever invited him to anything and he never took initiative to try anything new. At that point they'd have to get someone from his workplace, perhaps an acquaintance. They would confirm the body and...then what? His belongings wouldn't go to anyone, even if he wrote a will he wouldn't have anyone to send it to. In that case they would probably take it for themselves or put it up for auction somewhere. His position at work would be empty but replaced not long after by just another contractor. He would be gone, just like that. Almost as if he never existed. Rondo sunk into his chair and blurted out a soft "No." Vince furrowed his brow but didn't take his eyes off the window.

"What kinda fuckin' answer is that..."

The silence returned, thankfully that was a rhetorical question.

Rondo glanced at the dashboard's clock and noticed he was now 5 minutes late to being 15 minutes early for work. Cursing under his breath, he now got the attention of the two in the back. "What is it?" growled Vince.

"I'm late for work" croaked Rondo.

Vince paused, looking vacantly forward, until something clicked in his head.

"*Who do you work for*"

The second passenger let out a shrill, *odd* howl.

Rondo felt something impact the back left wheel of the car. The car itself let out a strange shriek as it revoked all control from Rondo. The car skid wildly and within seconds was perpendicular to the road. And just like that, silence once more. Everyone in the car was braced against the walls of the car, hunched into their seats. Just as Rondo dared straighten himself in the seat, a second impact came. This one was far worse. A black vehicle crashed straight into the same side of the car, right where Vince was sitting. It drove full speed into Rondo's car, sending the four-door coupe into a dozen flips. The three in the coupe rolled just as elegantly as the car did. Rondo's seat belt snapped, and his head went straight to the ceiling, knocking him out.

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He awoke a short bit later, lying prone on the ceiling of the car, now promoted to the floor. The coupe was upside down and just to the side of the road, in a light ditch. Glass and plastic were all over and Rondo's *everything* cried out in pain. There were at least 6 pieces of windshield in his right hand while his left had a severe numbness to it. He felt blood trying awkwardly to make its way down his forehead and around his eyelids. Despite all, his sunglasses remained intact, making his prior lack of frugality well worth it in the end. He raised his head slightly, looking out the driver's door which somehow remained closed. Re-immersing himself in reality, he saw a large black vehicle and five *Suits*.

They wore identical jet black suits with dark and square sunglasses. "Seems 'work' finally called" he thought to himself. Then he spotted a sixth Suit. They were dragging Vince by the scruff along the tarmac, pulling him through sprinkles of glass. Vince was in rough shape. His face looked like he'd been beaten to a pulp and his right arm was undeniably broken. Whether the crash or the Suit did it was up to question, but Vince wasn't fighting back anytime soon. He tried to struggle but may as well have been punching waves.

The suit dragged him to the centre point between their car and Rondo's, roughly twenty feet away. Another suit approached the incapacitated Vince, the rest remained leaning against their vehicle with expressionless faces. The black of the Suit's *everything* stood out like an error in the washed out environments of the sky and pale buildings nearby. There was nobody to witness whatever else happened here.

"Where is it?" said one, without emotion.

Vince remained quiet. It was then Rondo suddenly grasped the situation. They weren't here for him. Trying not to noticeably move, Rondo scanned his surroundings to see where the other passenger had gone. She wasn't in the car with him and the suit's don't seem to have them either.

“Last words.” the other suit said, pulling out a silenced pistol. He seemed to understand he wasn’t going to talk. The Suits were profession first and nothing else second, any time spent needlessly was time wasted. Aiming the pistol to Vince’s head, Vince took his opportunity to present the Suits with a lasting review of his time with them.

“I’d tell you to go fuck yourself...but clearly you beat me to it” Vince wheezed, ending on a soft laugh. The Suit shot him between the eyes without a flinch, and Vince’s body remained still. One Suit returned to the rest while the other stayed near the corpse. He had clearly felt something was off. His head scanned the horizon and stopped at the treeline near Rondo’s car. He hadn’t seen Rondo, but something near it.

Rondo gently turned his neck to see the second passenger standing at the treeline. She seemed distraught, frozen and pained over what happened to Vince. The Suit realised full well what she was and raised his pistol. In a snap, the Suit’s head imploded, the result of a well placed shot from elsewhere. Rondo ducked his head at the crack of another shot. Someone was out of sight and firing upon the Suits. The second passenger remains unmoved, unflinching. She stared melancholically at the corpse of Vince as chaos ensued over the site of the wreck.

While the Suits took aim and tried desperately to spot the source of the gunshots, Rondo took his chance. Mustering the strength to slide out the back of the coupe, he sees the Passenger again. He wanted to yell at them to move, to save themselves but he couldn’t risk it. Now was his chance to flee, to get the hell out of this whole situation. He desperately wanted to just go somewhere else but with every crack of a gunshot, the reality of the situation became clearer. There was no real return to normal after this. They know he was here. They know what he saw. They know how to make him not speak. His mind returned to his earlier thought, about how nobody would miss him.

The Suits were putting up a good fight. They had found the shooter and held a good position against them. Rondo made his choice. He ran in a hunched manner towards the passenger. She noticed him moving closer but barely reacted. He grabbed her arm and pulled as hard as he could, breaking them from her frozen state. Together, they ran to the nearby alleys and continued running. His legs took over and powered him onward, into the unknown with a person he didn’t even know. They took a break once he confirmed they couldn’t hear the shot’s anymore. Panting for breath, the two collapsed to the floor in exhaustion, leaning against a brick wall in a dingy back alley, barely lit by a single bulb.

Rondo noticed that she was injured much like himself. Her sunglasses were missing and her arm was scratched up with glass. Quickly, he had realised his mistake from back when he first saw them. The tint in his sunglasses had fooled him into thinking she had worn sunglasses. She never was wearing sunglasses, though her eyes were however akin to sunglasses. Large, round and black with a reflective shine to them. Between her eyes were miniature scales of blue, ranging from turquoise to azure. The blood on her arm was an unmistakable shade too pink for human blood. Rondo, eyes wide open and staring daggers at his ex-passenger, recalled what he overheard Vince say in the car.

*“There’s a white building behind the Level building in the Hanwa District. She needs to get there.”*

She was an alien. A paradox. An invalidation to everything this city has ever been told. Vince and his people clearly knew this and wanted to use her to break the walls of this prefecture. With resignation, he stood back up, offering her a hand up. If they were going to make it to Hanwa, they'd best get some new clothes.

"For a start" he said aloud to himself.

He took off his sunglasses and put them over her eyes, making her stand out far less. They set off at a casual pace, picking glass from their arms and walking further into the dim lit alleyways.

Rondo knew his life was over, but took solace in the fact that he was doing some good with it.