The banker looks on the hustle and bustle inside with a content look. His business has been thriving lately, and he expects the upward spiral to keep steady; the money is streaming in and the bonuses he can afford to expend are following the trend. He sees the many horizontal lines of people, ending with his employees behind counters and he feels an immense feeling of gratification. The past decades of hardships, every drop of sweat, every empty promise, every late night, every blow: it’s all been leading up to this moment, the turning point. Only a few more weeks, he thinks, then I’ll have repaid my debts in full and be secure, fiscally. As long as nothing goes wrong. Only a few weeks.

A man walks up to him. His clouded glasses cover his eyes, but his wide smile assures his friendliness.

“Excuse me, sir, but would ya kindly tell me the time? I’m afraid I musta gone and forgotten my watch at home.”

“Of course, dear customer.” The banker looks at the watch, wrapped tightly around his wrist. The second hand ticks away, steadily. In truth, it doesn’t fit perfectly. Either it’s too loose and threatens to fall off, or it’s too tight and chafes him. It’s the latter today, but he doesn’t mind the feeling, because it reminds him of the work he’s put in. It’s an expensive watch, an original *Trelex*, one he saved up for over the course of his career. Others in his trade would always laugh at him for how cheap his looked, so he splurged on this one: it’s a status symbol, truly. When they see it, no one dares to undermine him. The seconds continue to pass by.

Come to think of it, it’s almost my son’s 10th birthday: about time we give him a watch of his own. A good one, an expensive one, the one he deserves. Such a good boy he is, doing his best to follow in his father’s footsteps. Working hard, diligently, every day, just like his father did back in the day. It almost brings a tear to his eye.

“Sir?” The man asks. The banker, who had been absentmindedly thinking, drowning in his contentment, remembers the request.

“Apologies, I was lost in thought for a moment.” The hour hand is nearly striking 1 o’ clock. In the meantime, the second hand goes on, unfaltering, refusing to stop for anything. It reminds the banker of himself, toughing away. After all this time, maybe he can finally start to enjoy idling away his time, not needing to worry about the bills, putting food on the table and his dream, yet to be fulfilled. Tick, tock, the hand smacks itself forth, steadily.

“It’s a short minute until 1.”

“Thank you very much.” The man admires the watch for a moment. “Quite a beauty.”

“It’s a treasure of mine.” The banker delights in the man’s interest.

“Looks quite pricey.”

“Quite, but a worthy expense nonetheless. I firmly believe you can tell much about a man based only on his watch. It’s become a bit of a saying amongst my circle: the wrist makes the man. You notice right away if someone is faking, even a glimpse is enough. I would almost say it’s a man’s essence. Wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, I do so agree. Now, if you would excuse me, is about time to return to my line, before my spot get’s taken. Thanks for your time. The time.” He chuckles at his little joke.

“No need for thanks. Rather, thank *you* for your patronage.”

The two shake hands, before the man starts to make his way through the chamber. The banker looks at his back. His coat is wrinkling slightly – it must not have been ironed prior to coming here – and a scratch can be found here and there, if you look well. Even if one tries to hide it, nothing can escape this man’s watchful eye. It’s to be expected from someone in his line of work. If you don’t judge a person properly, you may lend to someone who can’t pay back, or take deposits from one who isn’t supposed to have anything: it’s a risk you can only prevent by looking behind what someone shows and seeing the truth of the person you’re observing. And when I study the man walking away there, I can almost see myself in him, working hard to hide that he’s not quite the same as the richer folk around him. In those short, brown hairs, peeking out from under his hat like birds coming out of their holes, searching for fresh air, I recognise the kid who would sneak into his father’s study and secretly take a book off the case and get stuck on a difficult word every half sentence, the schoolboy who would follow his father to work every week and bother him to get brought along, the adolescent who’d beg his father to borrow his watch, hat and coat so he could convince the banker to let him loan what he needed to start his own business.

He must be a good man, the banker thought. Undoubtedly.

“Good sir banker? Could I have a moment?” The one who spoke to him was a man he’d met earlier today, a temporary telegraphist. You see, aside from banking, another service was offered here: they had a working telegraph, so he would allow customers to use it as well, with minimal fees. This was one of the keys to the banker’s success, as many people were attracted by the prospect of being able to use a telegraph so cheaply. Even though the banker made a net loss every time someone sent one out, the additional service brought in extra customers, who easily made up for those losses. It gave him an edge over all the others, so it was an essential practice for the banker. He would do much to keep it running, so it came as quite a shock when his operator said he would not be able to show up today, due to an unforeseen emergency. The Saturday is quite busy, usually, combined with the fact that we’re close to a national holiday means quite some people are looking to send a relative word of what they’re up to. It would be nothing short of a disaster if he had to leave his service behind on this particular day, so it was quite a fright. Luckily, he brought someone along who could fulfill his role for him: that person is the one here now.

“Is something the matter?”

“It’s about time for my break,” the telegraphist says.

“Go ahead.” The banker usually wouldn’t trust someone, thrust on him as he was, but, somehow, this person was an instant exception. The banker thinks back to when he was introduced.

His first impression could not have been better: Appearance wise, he could only have been described as spotless: his coat showed not a single sign of decay, as if brand new, and he bared it out in the open – usually people try to hide the imperfections, but this man had nothing of the sort to be seen and he knew it as well.

“This man can replace me for the day,” the operator spoke. “He’s a friend and fellow telegraphist, Tex Sommel.” Tex took off his hat, presenting his well-combed, black hair, held it politely to his chest and bowed slightly, before putting it back on. Perfect.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir banker. Please allow me to be of assistance.” He firmly stuck out his hand, in one swift movement, and smiled kindly. The light, entering through the open doors, reflected off his watch, causing the banker to take a small step to the side. It was a beautiful one, the watch, a perfect fit, meticulously cleaned and cared for, to the point that calling it pristine would be almost an understatement. The banker recognised the build, as he had bought nearly the same one for his collection earlier. It wasn’t from a well-known branch, globally, but amongst people like himself, that branch was most definitely well respected. Rather, someone wearing a watch from them is close to guaranteed a collector too. Overall, the man called Tex exuded an air of confidence, of immaculateness, of perfection – maybe that’s why the banker, who was usually wary, trusted him so quickly. He took Tex’s hand and shook it, as firmly as Tex had presented it a moment ago.

“Likewise.”

“Then, I’ll leave you two to figure the terms out,” the operator said, before turning to his friend. “I’ll see you another time, Tex.”

“Another time. Good luck, friend.” They nodded to eachother, with a tap of their hats, before the operator walked out the open doors, surprisingly calm for a man faced with an emergency. Maybe he was simply taking a day off – he’d been working tirelessly the past few weeks, as there had been a surprising infux of customers who wanted to use the telegram. His breaks had been getting shorter and shorter and his days longer and longer, all for the sake of keeping up with demand. His face looked increasingly haggard as the weeks dragged on and the stress was easily noticeable, yet it seemed almost serene as he turned around to leave. The doors slam shut behind him.

The banker solemnly decided to decrease his workload somehow, even if he had to hire another operator. After their years of working together, the banker wouldn’t hesitate to call him a friend.

“So, sir Sommel–”

“Feel free to call me Tex.”

“Then, sir Tex, may I ask you a few preliminary questions?”

“Go ahead.”

That is how the two’s first meeting had concluded. In the end, even through his thorough questioning, the banker could not find even the slightest issue with Tex – hence, he was taken in without worries.

“Thank you for your hard work this morning,” the banker adds.

He nods politely, then calls for his daughter.

“Hayley,” he speaks with a perfectly controlled volume, teetering on the edge of a yell, yet not seeming as such, even by the largest stretch of the imagination.

She appears, toddling rapidly and unsteadily. As an obvious result, she loses her balance. Tex, with a swift and graceful movement, catches her, before berating her at a barely audible whisper. The scene puts a smile on the banker’s face. He sees his own son, in his younger days, running up to him after a bad fall, crying. With outspread arms, the banker received and comforted him, before taking care of his scraped knee. In those days, the banker still had his debts to worry about, but during tough times a single look at his lovely family would take his mind off it.

While he was reminiscing, Tex and his daughter had already disappeared into the crowd, most likely towards the resting benches near the entrance. The banker himself could easily relax, even on the most stressful of days, by sitting there. The tepid breeze and the soft rinkling of the bell whenever a customer entered were almost like the lullabies his mother would hum to soothe him in the cold nights, when they couldn’t afford firewood to burn and he, his parents and his sister would all huddle together under the warmest blanket they could find, keeping the chill out the best they could. They were tough times, war times, but he can look back on it tenderly now. The love and bond they’d fostered was irreplaceable and persisted until long after the war had finished. His nostalgic feelings bubble up as he thinks back and suddenly burst open in a desire to talk to his parents – something he hasn’t done in a while. He silently wishes they’d remember how to use the telephone, as he picks the bank’s off the wall and dials their number. He’d bought one for them and explained how to use them when he last visited, as he realised he’d be too busy with the bank to come by regularly. It rings a few times, but never goes over. He sighs, figures they must be out, and returns the telephone to its rightful spot, disappointed. As he steps away, he decides he’ll call again later today.

Suddenly, his ears ring. Smoke comes out of the telephone, only a few feet away from him, and an unusual screeching sound could be heard from it’s direction for a short moment, before dying down.

A gun had been fired.

A strange serenity is housed, briefly, before all hell breaks loose, people screaming and running around, until yet another shot could be heard. The banker is calm, but the panic had simply yet to set in.

“Shut it!” a man yells loudly. Everyone is silent, their attention soundly secured on the source of the voice. What they all see is a slightly haggard looking man, wearing clouded glasses, someone the banker recognises. It’s the person who’d asked him for the time. “Hands in the air, this is a robbery!”

*Robbery*. The moment he hears that word, the emotions flood him, running rampant in his head. Only a few weeks, he had thought, just moments ago. I’m so close to being stable, economically. Not quite there, but it couldn’t go wrong in these last few weeks, could it? No way. That’s how he’d convinced himself.

But now it’s all over. People will lose faith in his bank, they won’t believe it’s secure and they’ll want to withdraw from their accounts – any banker’s worst nightmare, because he won’t be able to pay out if too many people come to that conclusion. If one person too many comes and I have to tell them I can’t pay up, everyone will come. I wouldn’t be able to avoid bankruptcy. I won’t be able to avoid it. I can’t. It’s over.

This can’t be happening.

“You, fill this!” The robber’s voice snaps him out of the negative spiral of his thoughts. A sack is tossed towards one of his receptionists, the pistol’s direction following its trajectory. The chosen woman shakily picks it up and starts emptying the register into it.

If this robbery goes through, he’s finished. He has to stop it.

“Hurry up!” He yells at the chosen receptionist, who jumps at the sound, before speeding up the pace.

The police, the banker quickly remembers. He can call the police, they’ll stop him, and his bank will be fine! His hopeless feeling fades temporarily, before violently coming back when he looks towards the phone and he remembers the first shot – it had been aimed at it, to ensure they could not be contacted.

Then, a telegram! he thinks, but that thought is killed just as quickly as his earlier idea. Tex’ break had started and he was on the bench, the one he’d always use to calm down, which could now spell his doom, as it’s as far away from the telegraph as possible. Is there really nothing he could do? Is it really over?

He tries to think about it rationally. Even if he loses the bank, it’s alright – he’s almost paid back his debts. If he sells his assets, he should be able to do so completely, so the bank won’t have to matter. He’ll have to give up his dream, but that’s fine – he’s still got his family, his beautiful and kind wife, his cute and hardworking son. They can move in temporarily with his parents or his sister, just until they can find a new place to live and a steady job that can pay for it. He can start working as a financial advisor: he’s shown he has the skills for it, after all. All these years of work haven’t been for nothing. He looks at his wrist, his favourite watch wrapped firmly around it. It’ll be the proof he’s done well. He hasn’t lost everything.

“Banker!” he suddenly hears called out. “Toss the watch!”

His watch? He can’t take his watch! He can’t let him take this *and* his bank.

“But, sir,” he tries to protest, before being interrupted by the robber’s raspy yell.

“Shut it and toss it!”

He gulps loudly, swallowing his fears and stays perfectly still. He won’t do it. This watch is his pride, his work, his life, and he’ll never take it off. He solemnly swears he won’t, even if it costs him his life. That is, until a bullet storms past his head, barely passing him. He can only stand there, wide-eyed, in shock.

He almost died.

“I ain’t making no goddamn joke! Toss it!”

He shudders and his right starts stretching towards his left, almost automatically. He can’t control himself. He’s too frightened. He can’t stand up to the robber, can’t stand up to evil. All his hard work was for nothing. The *Trelex*, the watch that represents all his efforts, comes loose and he throws it through the air, in a perfect parabola. It lands neatly in his outstretched hand.

“Two minutes,” he mumbles, looking at the arms. “Within expectations.”

The receptionist finishes with the first register and the robber loudly scares her towards the next one. Everything is going according to his plan. The banker tries to make a plan of his own, anything, but his panicked mind can’t think. He’s stuck, stuck in his mind, stuck where he stands, stuck in time, unable to move, act, or ponder or anything. He’s got nothing left. The moments pass in a flash, the loud yells of the robber barely registering, and everything has been plundered. What now? What now? Nothing. It’s over. The man with the clouded glasses marches towards the exit. There’s a way out for the robber, the evildoer, but none for him. It’s unfair.

“Are you okay?” Someone asks, suddenly. The banker looks up to find the speaker and finds them at the exit: it’s Tex’ daughter.

“What?” The robber stammers, looking at her, who’s blocking his way out, surprised.

“I don’t think you should do this.” She stands there, steadfast, determined. Whether it’s courage or recklessness, the banker doesn’t know, but he’s impressed nonetheless: such a young kid has the guts to stand up to him, yet I don’t? He feels a tint of shame come up.

He points the pistol at her. “And I think you should get the fuck out of the way, before I’m forced to shoot a kid dead.” She doesn’t move, holds her ground.

“I can’t. Papa told me to always help the troubled.”

He suddenly burst out in hateful laughter. “Is that so?” He gestures to the bankgoers around him. “Ya need to help all these poor, poor people?”

“I mean you.”

“What?”

“You’re the most troubled one here, aren’t you?”

He scoffs. “So ye’r gonna save me? From what, myself? Is that it?”

“I think what she meant,” Tex says, stepping in front of her, “is that you don’t seem to be doing this out of ill will or selfishness.”

“Why the fuck else would I be doing it?”

“Because you think there’s no other choice.”

“So I don’t, and then what? Ya think I can afford to stop, just like that? Hell no!”

“You’re under the wrongful impression you’re in too deep to escape.”

“Says who? Mister succes over there, by the door? Wit’ yer nice clothes, yer expensive watch, yer cute little daughter? Who the fuck are *you* to tell a street rat like me what I can and can’t do?”

“I tell it because I know exactly what its like. I was just like you back in the day.”

“And then? Ya escaped through hard work and effort an’ built up a life?” He slams his fist on a nearby counter. His expression, although angry as ever, now has hints of bitterness. The banker recognised it as the face of someone who’s tried their damnedest, without succes; he’s seen it plenty of times in the mirror. “’Cause I can tell you I did everything I goddamn could, and I’m still standing here, armed wit’ stolen bags of cash. Don’t ya come here *now*, telling me what I coulda fucking done about it, ya asshole!”

“I won’t, and wasn’t planning to. I escaped through pure luck, after all.”

“Then what the hell are ya on about, wit’ yer *wrongful impression* bullshit? I ain’t been lucky for a second in my whole goddamn life.”

“Except now.”

“What?”

“I can be your lucky break. I can be your path to freedom.”

A small laugh of disbelief escapes from under his now-bewildered expression. The banker finally understands what Tex is doing. He isn’t trying to save the bank: he’s saving the robber. Helping the bank is but an added bonus.

“…how?” The robber starts to show interest, as the prospect of a possibility, a chance, a slimmer of hope of escaping from his fate sinks in.

“I’ll tell you. But first, you have to stop.”

Although his gun is still outstretched, Tex approaches the robber. Slow and steady, he closes in on him. The robber suddenly tenses up, letting the bags fall to the ground as he clutches the pistol with both hands.

“Yer’d better not try anything,” he yells, suddenly nervous.

“I won’t. I promise.”

“Swear it! On the Angels!”

“I swear it on my benefactors life.” He tenses up more.

“I said, the Angels.”

“I hate the Angels with a passion. Vowing to them would be less than insincere.”

The robber doesn’t respond.

“I mean you no harm. Rather, I’m on your side – provided you’re willing to help yourself.”

“And all these other people then? They have plenty reason to hold a grudge.”

“I suppose. Although, most people here haven’t been harmed in any real way. That is, if you are to return the money you took.”

The robber stands in silence, as Tex resumes his advancement a few moments later. The banker finds himself cheering him on, but not for the reason he thought. Not because his bank would be saved, but the robber, the man in whom he had seen himself in that moment – so close, yet seemingly so far away – maybe. It touched him.

When he’s an arm’s length away from the robber, Tex extends his hand forward, grabbing the barrel of the revolver and pulling it down, as the robber finally relaxes his arms. He looks down to the ground, almost in shame.

“You’ve made the right choice.” Tex tells the robber, as he takes the pistol into his own hands. He wraps his arm around the robber’s waist and starts to lead him towards the exit.”

“W-wait a minute!” the receptionist, who’d been forced to assist the robber, calls out. “You can’t just leave!”

“Why not?” Tex answers, as he looks up at her.

“Because, because, *I’ve* been harmed by him! I can’t just let him go without any punishment. I won’t!”

Tex briefly looks at the gun he’d taken from the robber, then says, while smiling at her, “Oh, you will.”

The receptionist gulps, understanding exactly what Tex had meant by that. She doesn’t speak up again, while the two men everyone’s focused on approach the exit. Tex calls for his daughter, who follows him out the door, but not before he shoots a look towards the dumbstruck banker. He looks him straight in the eyes, while the hand, that had been on the robber’s side until a moment ago, moves to the bench in a fist. When he opens it, the banker’s *Trelex* shows itself, falling gently onto the wooden surface. As it glistens in the sun, Tex nods to him, *I’ll be back*.

Tex’ figure disappears behind the walls of the bank, together with his daughter and the robber.

“Sorry…can we…take a break for a moment?”

“Are you okay, Papa?”

“I’m just a little out of breath…don’t worry about me.”

“You should exercise more! Then, you can be all fit – like me!”

“I suppose having a ton of useless energy does, occasionally, come in handy.”

Hayley pouts.

“It’s not useless!”

“Debatable.”

“Um, ya alright, Mr…”

“Tex. Just call me that.”

“Then, Tex, ya good to go? I don’t think we should be stayin’ round this area too long, even if we ran a bunch already.”

“You’re right – let’s not overstay our welcome. I don’t see any particular need to hurry more, however.”

*I don’t want to either,* he murmurs under his breath.

“Then, let’s walk.”

“Yes, let’s. And while we’re at it, I think it’d be good to talk a little more about the future. Yours, to be more precise.”

They start to move.`

“May I ask you a question?”

“…sure.”

“Do you have a personal philosophy?”

“A personal philosophy?”

“Yes. A belief, or set of beliefs, which you adhere to and base your actions on.”

“Hmm. Dunno.”

“It can be anything, you know? Hayley, can you give us an example?”

“I believe any day you don’t eat delicious food is a wasted one!”

“Something like that. Well, it’s a silly example-”

“Hey!”

“-but it’s a good one nonetheless. So, I ask again, do you have a personal philosophy?”

The robber takes a moment to mull it over.

“Well, I guess I think ya should never abandon yer allies.”

Tex smiles.

“That’s a very respectable conviction – I’m sure many people will agree with you on that belief.”

“…thanks?”

“I ask, of course, because I also have one – and it pertains very directly to why I want to help you. Would you like to hear it?”

“Shoot.”

“You see, I firmly believe that no person does evil out of nothing but ill will. Whether it be due to circumstances in their upbringing, to financial status, to pure and utter bad luck, no one is evil for evil’s sake, and, therefore, no one should be considered irrehabilitable. Does that make sense?”

“Not really.”

“I get it! …sort of.”

Tex chuckles.

“Well, the gist of it is that I think everyone deserves a second chance – or, in some case, a first chance.”

“And that’s why ya wanted me outta that place? To give me another chance?”

“Yes.”

“But, I’m afraid I can’t do mucha anything with the opportunity, even though ya went so far for me. I don’t have the slightest where to go from here.”

“Well, you’re in luck; I do.”

“Huh?”

“You see, I happen to know of another man in this city who shares my philosophy. A real magnanimous fella – generous, benevolent, giving, and, most of all, kind to a fault. One of his biggest goals in life is to help the…*underprivileged,* so to speak.”

“And ya think that man can help? Just one man?”

“For sure. Thing is, he just so happens to be the mayor of the city.”

“D’ ya think he’ll help even criminals?”

“*Especially* criminals. He’s convinced no one *wouldn’t* live a proper life, provided they’re given the chance.”

“Izzat why ya say he’s kind to a fault?”

“Yep. I’ve worked with him a bit in the past as well, and I assure you he’s every bit the man I put him up to be.”

“So, if I meet with ‘im, ya say I’ll be good to go?”

“Well, it’ll be hard to *meet* him directly – he’s a very busy man, after all – but if you join his *introduction to society* class, he’ll make sure everything’s taken care of. Provided you don’t shirk your work, that is.”

“Work?”

“They hook you up with some simple work to start with – just some menial labour or oddjobs, usually – as a first step towards integration. The wages aren’t great, but you’re provided with housing and foodstuffs during your time in the program.”

“Sounds kinda like prison time.”

“Voluntary imprisonment!”

Tex chuckles.

“It’s a bit similar, I suppose. But, you know, prison without restricted freedom doesn’t sound too bad, no?”

“And then what? Ya stuck doin’ slave work the rest o’ yer life, or what?”

“Not quite – that’s just phase one. Phase two is getting your existence properly documented, and then helping you start to apply for education or a separate job. Phase three is letting you settle into the rhythm of whatever you ended up with in phase two and then, finally, phase four is ‘graduation,’ more or less, where you’ll be moving out of the provided housing and finally gain full independence, as far as that’s possible.”

The man looks slightly befuddled.

“”

“…”

“May I guess what you’re thinking?”

“…You may.”

“Something like, ‘Even though you helped me, I don`t know where I could possibly go from here. I can`t turn my life around so easily.’”

“…”

“’And, besides, even if you help me, what about my comrades? I`m not alone in my suffering, and I never have been. Can I leave my friends behind, just like that?’”

“…”

Tex glances at the non-responsive ex-robber.

“Regardless of whether that’s what you were really thinking or not, I’m going to answer those questions, alright?”

“Okay…”

“As you know, it’s very hard to escape from a life of poverty and crime, in this society of ours. Extremely hard, even – the opportunities just don’t seem to be there, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’m here to say that you’re in luck. You see, I happen to have had a little…partnership with the mayor of this city, in the past.”

“So what, you callin’ in a favour for me?”

“Not at all. Thing is, the mayor is a very nice person – to a fault, almost. He’s generous and benevolent, and wishes the best for people. All people.”

“Even criminals?”

“*Especially* criminals. He, much like me, believes that no one *chooses* to go into crime. It’s all forced – whether it be circumstances born from pure chance, or some other factor, it’s never truly by choice. If given the options to live a proper life, no one wouldn’t.”

“’s that why you say he’s kind to a fault?”

“Yes. But, for you, it’s the best opportunity there is.”

“d’ ya think I could just, dunno, wander up and ask for help?”

“Not quite. He’s started up a certain program, you see. Well, he’s started up a bunch of programs in this effort, but this specific one will be of help to you.”

“Get on with it, then.”

“You see, the purpose of this program is to create a doorway for the…*underprivileged*, so to speak, to join working society through government assistance. First, they help with documenting your existence in the first place: they officially register your name, age, that kind of thing, so you can be officially recognised as a person in the face of the ruling class.”

“That’s…a start, I guess?”

“Yep, but it’s just a start. Afterwards, they’ll hook you up with some simple work – usually menial labour or oddjobs – and, while you’re doing this, they provide you with simple lodging and foodstuffs. So, basically, the wages are low, but your needs are taken care of.”

“Like a prisoner?”

Tex chuckles.

“A little bit, I guess. They can’t simply give things away, after all, nor can they let you run free so easily.”

“And then? You stuck doin’ slave work for the rest of your life or what?”