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There he is.

The hotel room is dim, but Casey isn't hard to find.

His body is a beacon of desperate protest underneath a forgiving silk tee. Bone thin. Skin bagging from every corner of his six-foot frame. A good guess would be one-hundred and twenty pounds. He has more hair, just not on his head. Fuzzy wisps of keratin on his arms and thick on the nape of his neck. Inky around the eyes, a dire pigmentation that frames the focus he is straining to hold on the stranger at the other end of the makeshift dining table.

Casey is binge-reading still, and by the look of him, he has been binge-reading far too often.

The spread between the two men is huge, was huge, most of the food has already been eaten.

The client's eyes are wide but unmoved by the brittle hands Casey is using in lieu of utensils. The fingers clutching each next bite are topped with nail beds of blue. The knuckles on his index and middle are callused to the point of deformity. This client's indifference is nothing new. Like all customers, he is

there to hear his future. It has never mattered how the pig is slaughtered so long as the bacon tastes good.

Lylia is there too. She hasn't left Casey yet, though their age difference looks as if it's somehow doubled. Longer hair now, green eyes still bright, the only authentic shine in the room. Her arms are firmly folded atop a roadblock stance halfway between the client and the front door. At her size, her posture is hardly intimidating, but for someone so small, she can explode big.

The air stinks. It isn't just the food. Beyond cooling grease and the chemically crafted scents of take-out littered about the table, the odors turn human quick. Inhale like you mean it and you can smell the sin. A half-century's worth of intimacy baking in the manufactured heat of the room's lone window unit.

The repugnant bouquet is married to the chomp, smack, and slurp of Casey's consumption. He is eating hard. He is swallowing fast. Wet. In fact, everything feels wet. Rooms like this one have a squish to them that is everlasting. Stray spit won't make much difference.

The bathroom door behind Casey is open. For now, the smell of upchuck is faint, maybe imagined. There is a beige sink, a matching toilet, and a poky little tub with a basin too small for anyone un-elfin. Any of the three are good for vomit. If Casey were to make sick prematurely, the carpet underfoot would hide it well: it's a synthetic jumble of colors expertly designed to disappear manmade soils. Casey has a twenty-three-gallon Rubbermaid imitation at his side, just in case. Its corner-store price tag hasn't been removed. Accidents happen. The only thing closer to Casey than this emergency bin are his and Lylia's bug-out bags.

The client begins to fidget, he can't keep his focus on the spectacle in front of him. He looks to the television, then to the table lamp, then back to the black screen of the TV. He actively works at fixating on anything that isn't the redundancy of

Casey eating and eating. There isn't much to distract a person in this by-the-hour room. Perhaps inadvertently, he lands his gaze on the open black duffel at the end of the bed. The stacks of money define the bag's canvas. The stranger's attention sits on the opportunity, hanging there just long enough to visibly concern Lylian.

It starts with a twitch. Her arms uncross and she takes one step forward. Her eyes reach for Casey, but he is lost in his gorge, oblivious to Lylian's subtle just-in-case preparations.

This client could be one of David's thugs. Then again, any human being could: all ethnicities, a child, a senior citizen, religious or agnostic. David is an equal opportunity criminal, a true champion of diversity in the workplace.

Lylian puts a hand on the table lamp, wraps her fingers around its base. If this stranger decides to go rogue, she has all she needs to bash the back of his skull.

There is a mumble. It's enough to break the client's fixation on the bag of cash. He looks back to Casey, but Lylian remains committed.

"Did you say something?" the client asks, the words passing through what is left of his jagged, flaxen teeth.

Casey struggles to form a comprehensible answer. His response works its way around the saliva-soaked mass he hasn't stopped chewing. "How will the world know you?" he repeats.

"Are you askin' me? You should be telling me."

The loss of confidence in the client's voice doesn't go unnoticed by Lylian. Her grip tightens on the lamp's base.

With his eyes shut tight, Casey goes adrift on his own question. He silently mouths it a few more times. Then, through quivering lips, he repeats it aloud, changing just the last word.

"How will the world know me?"

"How the fuck should I know?" the client spits.

His head swings back toward Lylian. He is seeking reassur-

ance, says “is this guy for real?” without saying it at all. Lylian is lightning quick.

“Míralol!” she barks. “Por Dios, look ahead, let him work through it.” The order is firm enough to keep the client from noticing she’s armed.

He turns around and growls, “The pretty ones are always cunts, no?”

Casey’s eyes offer nothing.

“Hey! Anybody home?” the client asks, waving a hand in front of Casey. He pounds the table. “Are you seeing anything yet? I didn’t pay five-fuckin’ grand to hear what the hell *you’ll* be doing in the future.” Bam! His second pound means business; the clatter of jumping silverware and glass resets Casey’s focus.

“Almost ready,” he says. “To see you, not me, of course.”

Casey’s upcoming vision will likely be nothing too improbable. A lover penetrating another man’s wife, one partner robbing his best friend or partner blind, an inoperable situation for a sister who doesn’t pull through. And those hypotheticals are more dramatic than what Casey typically foresees. There is less oomph in the trade of clairvoyance than its mythos tends to portray.

Casey continues eating. He selects each new item from the table in a simple sequence. Salty, sweet, salty, sweet; repeat, repeat, repeat. The only hard-and-fast rule is this: no reading meal begins with anything other than a whole bag of nacho cheese flavored tortilla chips. Brand-name or any other neon-orange dusted knock-off chip can perform the very same important role. America’s favorite snack goes in first and comes out last. When the bright flecks wave back at him from the bottom of the toilet, Casey can be certain he has rid his guts of everything he’d just eaten.

A sixteen-inch sausage pizza sits on the table. The cooling oil on its surface glistens in the flickering light of a dozen candles. The cheap glass tubes are the East Coast variety, each

featuring a hastily glued graphic of Divino Niño Jesus on its side. The son of God is trying his best to help the pizza maintain its appeal. The pie is right next to the last wedge of what had been a full chocolate cheesecake. Casey grabs for the final piece of the desert and holds it over a feast that would make Edesia nauseous. He gets stuck in the study of it.

Lilian leans to her left while lightly waving at Casey with her available hand. He doesn't budge. She hurls a near silent *for fuck's sake, keep this thing moving* right at him. Nothing. Her eyes refuse to relent. The intensity of her impatience could burn the whole room down. She takes two angry steps that bring her uncomfortably close to the table, lamp still at the ready, barely hidden behind her back.

The client's head starts to cock over his right shoulder, but Casey shoves the whole gelatinous triangle into his already crowded mouth. It's enough to retain the client's attention. Lilian falls back. The stranger inches his chair closer to the table as if he's not completely satisfied with her retreat. He looks up at Casey, there isn't a hint of disgust on his face. At some point, most clients squirm, but this guy's steady suggests he has seen some things.

Casey swallows, closes his eyes, and reaches for the stranger's willing hands.

The money they're making for this reading hardly seems worth Casey's condition. The duffle bag appears chock-full. At some point, five grand more is no longer the difference between life and death.

Minutes pass with Casey saying nothing. The client appears comfortably unaware that anything might be wrong, his hands resting calmly within Casey's firm grip.

By now, Casey should be reeling off the man's future. The remnants of food on the plates, plastic wrappers, and boxes in front of him suggest a caloric intake of five figures, easy. His

eyes open, revealing an uncharacteristic panic. Quickly, he looks past the John, tries to find a solution in Lylian.

From under a puckered brow, she doesn't speak, but the message her face conveys is familiar.

Think of me, think of Ruby.

Casey releases the stranger's hands. His fingers tremble over the table as he searches for one more bite to jumpstart the vision. He touches an empty basket that reeks of Double Philly Cheesesteak Burger. The matching basket to its side is down to one dry, leftover chili-cheese fry. Casey throws himself into the hunt, nearly hovering over the table. He rifles around empty two-liters, passes up an open bag of bite-sized chocolate bars, then knocks over a bucket of weight gain powder. The dust-up does little to hide his growing anxiety. He swipes at two ten-piece fried chicken boxes. Empty. He turns over the creamy ranch containers the chicken came with, already licked clean.

Revisiting all he has eaten starts the convulsions. The rise and fall from the deep of his throat is audible. His body will only obey his brain for so long. He must decide on another bite quick or there won't be any need for jamming two fingers hard to the back of the tongue later. To put it plainly, the puke wants out and it wants out now.

With the skill of a teenage boy who practices often on his older sister's bra, Casey pops open a sealed box of donut holes with just one hand. The client follows the trajectory of each tiny confection. From the box to Casey's mouth, from the box to Casey's mouth, one donut hole at a time, then two, then three. When the box is empty, Casey reaches for a Twinkie.

That's the snack that breaks the camel's back. The stranger winces, curling his nostrils overtly to punctuate his disgust. He may be upset by what he is seeing or he may be upset because he is starting to suspect the voodoo he paid for isn't real.

"It is time!" Casey dramatically improvises.