

KENNY stood over a surveillance tech watching a feed from the eye in the sky. A slight man wearing a grey suit was in profile. He kept fidgeting with the gold rim of his glasses, and his eyes remained on the felt.

"What's he at?" Kenny said.

"Sixty-seven and some change."

"Thousand?"

"Yessir."

"Why didn't you call me when he got to fifteen?"

The surveillance tech glanced back at Hector Vargas, the Mingan's head of security.

"We tried, sir," Hector said. "The landline, your cell, we couldn't reach you."

And to think he might lose all that dough for some lousy lay and a sob story? Nah. Not tonight. "You figure he's working with someone?"

Hector shook his head. "Too empty, easy to spot."

"Well it ain't luck."

"No, it's skill," the tech said, his eyes on the monitor. "He's counting."

"Bullshit."

"No sir, check it out." The tech pecked a few keys switching

the feed to a different angle. This one frontal, closing in.

Kenny turned to Hector. "Got any ID on him?"

"No sir, we don't know if he's local or a tourist."

"The fuck have you been doing?"

"Only thing we could. Watching, waiting for you."

Kenny glared at Hector, holding it long enough until the others in the room noticed.

"See his mouth?" the tech said, pointing at the screen. "He's counting, all right. And watch, the dealer's coming around...there he goes...dishes the card, this guy checks it, then looks up...bam, right there, like he's doing the math in his head."

"What's he holding?" Kenny said.

"Eleven."

"And the dealer?"

The tech punched a few keys. "Fourteen. But he's showing the four, not the fish hook."

"So he should double-down," Hector said.

The dealer checked his bottom card, then signaled the man in glasses. The man waved a palm over his eleven. The dealer hesitated. Now the other player at the table was saying something. But the man in glasses pointed at the guy's stack, then his own stack, looked up and said something to the dealer. It was definitive. The other player paused, then waved a palm over his own cards. The dealer revealed his fourteen. He drew a face card and busted.

What a pompous little prick, Kenny thought. He told Hector to intercept, to bring that motherfucker to the office.

* * *

Hector Vargas took the freight elevator down to the main floor.

He didn't take it personal back there, the boss-man's glaring. He knew Mr. Shepard was just trying to assert himself, show some authority in front of the others. He had been with Kenny since the Mangan opened and knew everything there was to know about the man. Shit, he'd served under worse officers in the Marine Corps. Way worse. And the way he saw it? His ass wasn't on the line if he took a little shit from Kenny or didn't like an order. No, this job was kush. What they call smooth sailing. Hector figured he'd just keep cashing checks until he had enough for a place in the mountains and another on the beach.

He radioed security, made everyone aware of the situation and told the exit detail to be on standby, just in case the twerp was a runner.

A voice came through his earpiece saying the man had colored up. He'd left the table, cut past the slots and was heading, it looked like, for the cashier's cage.

Hector radioed the surveillance tech now. "How much is he walking out with?"

"Seventy-two, eight-fifty."

"He tip the dealer?"

"A nickel."

Hector hesitated before putting the mike back to his lips. "Five grand?"

"No, sir. Five bucks. He's a cheap ass."

The doors parted. Hector moved down a drab corridor, hiking his slacks, resituating the .40 Sig on his hip. He swiped his keycard and saw the man through the golden slats of the cage, leaning on the counter watching the cashier work.

Hector forced a smile, buttoned his suit jacket and pointed at the man. "That is quite the stack of chips there. Congratulations, sir."

"Thank you," the man said, though he didn't look up.

Hector extended a hand through the slats. "Hector Vargas. Casino Operations here at the Mingan," already feeling the burn in his cheeks from the fake smile.

The man said, "How do you do," and shook Hector's hand, but still wouldn't look up.

It pissed Hector off. This squat little shit thinking he's the man, counting along with the cashier.

"You from around here, or just passing through?"

"What difference does it make?"

Hector had enough. He put a hand on the cashier's shoulder. "Do me a favor, send all this up with a bottle of some nice champagne to the high-rollers' suite. We'll finish everything up there."

That got his attention.

"You know, that's not really—I'm sort of in a hurry, so..."

Hector waited for him to finish, but apparently that was it. So Hector said, "You don't wanna count this in the open, trust me. Some people lose their nest egg, get desperate, you could find yourself on the receiving end, most likely in the parking garage with no security, no witnesses... I assure you, it's merely a precaution. For your safety, of course." Hector dropped the smile to let the guy know he was serious.

"Fine, whatever." The man looked at the cashier. "Make it a gin martini, would you? I don't drink champagne." He pushed off the counter, straightened and asked Hector which way.

Hector moved out of the cage and guided the man toward the west bank, swiping his keycard to call the elevator. "I'm

sorry, I never did get your name.”

“Jim,” the man said. “Jim Moffat.”

When the doors parted, he let Jim Moffat go first. Hector swiped his keycard again and took them up to the penthouse.

On the way, Hector touched his earpiece, pretending to get a transmission. He told Jim Moffat sorry, waited a moment, then lowered his hand. “That was the floor staff. Apparently, they were impressed by how well you took care of the dealers.”

“Well, it’s important to look after the little people.”

Hector rolled his eyes. “What do you do?”

“I’m an attorney. Family planning, real estate law, that kind of thing. It’s boring, really, but it pays the bills.”

It was quiet now, save the Muzak overhead. Hector didn’t speak, curious to see how long this weasel could tolerate the silence.

“So... What was it that drew you into the casino business?”

Hector just looked at him, thinking this dumbshit had no idea of what he was walking into.

When they entered the office, Jim Moffat didn’t see anyone because he was too busy looking at all the shit on the walls. A bunch of mounted animal heads. Exotic, big-game types. The kind you see on those wild shows filmed over a decade in places like Africa or Alaska or some undomesticated island you never heard of. Three antelope were stacked staring at a grizzly in contrapposto. There were birds he had never seen. A wolverine. About the only other animal he recognized was a deer—or maybe it was an elk?—an ear cocked like it heard something peculiar before getting its ass blown off.

Moffat stopped at an old photo of some ugly Indian, a head

of greasy hair under a bunch of feathers. The Indian was in profile, pointing at something out of frame. Moffat moved past an ebony desk trimmed in gold, ran his fingers over it and said, "Ohmigod is that real?"

The muscle-dude's response? Shoving him into the next room. He'd been doing it since they got off the elevator. Moffat knew they caught him counting soon as the muscle-dude flashed that fake smile at the cage. He had tried to play it cool, acting like he didn't care. When that didn't work, he made small talk even though the guy didn't have shit to say in the elevator. So he decided he'd wait to meet the honcho, but it wasn't like they could do anything. Counting was frowned upon, not illegal—even if they could prove it. They might ask him to leave for good, maybe blacklist him, but you could bet your ass he wasn't going anywhere without that seventy-two large.

The muscle-dude shoved him again. He saw something flash across his face, inches it seemed, moving left to right. Moffat turned, saw it slam into a mannequin against the wall.

Christ. A damn arrow.

Moffat swiveled left, saw a dude sporting a slick ponytail with his back turned. And behind the dude was a squaw in a calico dress nocking another arrow to a bow almost as tall as the squaw herself. The dude was in a velvet sport coat, the collar popped. When he turned, Moffat saw he wasn't wearing a shirt underneath.

"There's a system in Vegas," the dude said. "And the general rule of thumb is, the more people staring at you, the more trouble you can expect. You win enough, you get the attention, that brings the heat. Soon after, the tap. Nine times out of ten they just ask you to leave, maybe comp you at the restaurant

as a parting gift.”

“An-an-and,” Moffat stopped. The room seemed smaller. He could feel the muscle-dude right behind him, a dozen sets of eyes looking at him. He licked his lips, saying, “An...and the other one?” pretty sure he was looking at Kenny Shepard.

“They call the police. You spend a night in jail, maybe pay a fine. That backroom electric saw shit doesn’t happen anymore.”

Moffat slumped, sighed relief. “Oh.”

The squaw drew the bowstring and fired. The arrow slammed into the mannequin’s chest.

Jesus Christ.

On second look, Moffat realized it wasn’t a mannequin, but one of those punching bags made to look like a chiseled human—just the head and torso, no arms. It wore a cavalry hat with gold tassels on the brim. A green apple rested atop the hat. And two fucking arrows were now sticking out of its chest, another half dozen in the drywall around it.

Moffat said, “La...la-look,” pausing to clear his throat. “It’s Mr. Shepard, correct?”

Kenny nodded.

“I re-realize I ma-made a mistake. Please, if you’ll just—I don’t even care about the money okay, if you’ll just let me walk out of here...”

Kenny’s laugh filled the room. “The money? Oh, you never had it to begin with. How tall are you?”

Moffat was confused. He said, “Huh,” to which Kenny said, “Your height? You know, five-five, five-seven maybe?”

“Right, my height. Yeah, I’m five-nine. Why?”

“Nah, come on.”

“I am, sir. I’m five-nine.”

"Hmm... Hector, would you mind?"

The muscle-dude grabbed Moffat by the collar and towed him in front of the punching bag mannequin thing. Moffat was saying, "Please, if you'll just let me explain—" but stopped when he saw the hard edges and the little black hole of the automatic. And from where? He didn't even see the muscle-dude reach for it. But there it was, the man's fucking pistol looking right at him.

Hector said, "Move again," like it was a dare.

Moffat didn't.

"Look at that, I can still see the apple," Kenny said, smiling, having a good time. "Kudos to you my friend for not fibbing about your height. Says a lot about you." He pointed at the bow. "That was my great-grandfather's. Apparently it was used in the Great Sioux War of 1876. It's made of the finest ash and juniper on the continent."

"It-it-it's a beautiful piece."

"Personally, I think it's a piece of shit. Even a sharpshooter like Wakhuwa here can't hit anything with it half the time."

Wakhuwa drew the bow back and fired.

Shit!

Moffat squeezed his eyes and screamed until he heard the arrow slam into the wall behind him.

"See what I mean?"

Moffat turned, saw tail-feathers so close he could touch them. Shouldn't there have been a countdown, or a warning? Something?

Kenny said, "But with this..." and reached into the wardrobe, pulling out some kind of modern hunting bow with all sorts of gizmos on it. "She can hit an elk in the heart at seventy-five yards, no problem."

Jim Moffat was certain now it was a fucking elk up there, not a deer. He found it on the wall and swore the elk was smiling at him. The thing looking down from elk heaven, saying, You're next you little turd.

Moffat pleaded, telling Kenny there had to be something he could do.

"What do you think?" Kenny said to Hector.

"Cheater's Justice is my favorite."

"It is. He loves Cheater's Justice. You know what? Fuck it, I'm game for that. Let's do Cheater's Justice."

Moffat looked at Hector. The man was grinning.

"But I want to give her another shot at that apple first," Kenny said, swapping bows with Wakhuwa. "She's so close. I thought she had it with that last one."

"Maybe a degree to the left," Hector said.

"See, I can't remember the last time the sights were zeroed though. So much work, not enough time to go hunting."

The squaw drew another arrow back, the tethers of the bowstring taut. Moffat didn't know what to do but bob and yell please, for God's sake.

"It helps if you close your eyes," Kenny said.

Moffat couldn't. Not with the light glinting off the arrowhead's razor tip. He tightened his sphincter and tried to think. What could he do? This guy was the most powerful man in Spearfish, maybe the Midwest. Between him and that soon-to-be mayor girlfriend, there wasn't anything they didn't have—which meant Moffat didn't have jack he could provide as a peace offering.

Wait a second. That's right. The girlfriend. Whatshername? Custer, right? That was one thing he didn't have. One of the largest ranches in Spearfish and the only one to border the

reservation.

“Wait!” Moffat said. “I can give you the Flying-C. The Custer ranch.”