Sidr *hated* having their meals interrupted.

This was principally due to the way they were raised and educated. An unorthodox and culturally regressive childhood in a family environment that many would consider tribal – according to Sidr’s adult peers, that is; their loss – and which focused on skills and habits that had been rendered ‘obsolete’ by the helpful gadgets of everyday life in ‘civilization’. All of it coupled with a ‘useless’ formal education in the professions of “Hospitality and Meal Preparation”, activities with a niche (almost restrictive) market of high society eccentrics, themselves a dwindling pool of clients. ‘Long-dead’ trades for a ‘elitist community of weirdos’ were not in the repertoire of skills of normal persons. Not unless they were someone who enjoyed the act of eating.

Another big reason was what was wasted. Time, energy, ingredients, currency, etc… All used to create a well-planned and choreographed experience. Sourcing the tools to do this – the pots, pans, cutlery and utensils, even the gas stove – had already been a waste of valuable currency, according to Sidr, since the parts could have been salvaged from the Derelicts with relative ease. Not by Sidr themself, their constitution had never allowed it. Not in youth, and definitely not now. But that didn’t prevent Sidr from thinking the exchanges were a waste of currency. Sourcing the ingredients had also been a hassle. They didn’t cost real currency, only the money that Sidr could earn passively and effortlessly. The hassle was in finding vendors that actually provided the raw and discriminated ingredients instead of the processed nutrient pastes that went into the standard meal machines.

This being all to say that Sidr *hated* having their meals interrupted. And someone just had.

Forced from their moment of serenity, Sidr was forced to take note of the well-armed Scavenger that waited their attention at the door. They could see them through the video feed, on the intercom. As a rule, all Scavengers carried some sort of weapon, but Maldi – the one visiting Sidr now – always was extra about it. Sidr was the one to introduce Maldi to Nimble, however, so they had no cause to complain if they showed up at their door with the best equipment in the business. They also carried an unusually shaped bag, too big to be the records, archives, and intelligence that Sidr often dealt in, but too small and oddly shaped to be machine salvage. Sidr also hadn’t commissioned any specific piece of machinery to be brough to them, so Maldi had obviously found something rare, maybe unique, and thought it valuable enough to bring it to Sidr’s door directly.

Sidr chose to be fashionably slow in answering the intercom and letting Maldi in. They pondered not answering or turning Maldi away, but it would be bad form to turn away their most successful Scavenger when the guarantee of profit was in play, interrupted meal notwithstanding. More than well-armed, Maldi was clever and resourceful. They had to be, if they wished to have any success in being a Scavenger. Sidr had made a wise choice investing in them and now that investment was bringing in unexpected, but welcome, returns.

Maldi entered the reception area of the office, them standing on one side of the steel bars and Sidr standing on the other. The bars couldn’t stop anything on their own – Maldi’s weapon could break holes in bunker walls, had they wanted – but they served their purpose as a formal separation between Scavenger and Broker. Sidr scanned Maldi up and down, the Scavenger’s figure rough and menacing, a purposeful ruse to create an appearance of overwhelming strength, contrasted heavily by the impossibly well-kept and dashingly beautiful weave of luscious hazel hair sitting on their head. That last bit annoyed Sidr to no end; they couldn’t keep their own hair that well-groomed despite almost never leaving the house. But it was so beautiful that they couldn’t be more than passingly angry. Maldi obviously used some sort of self-grooming kit that Sidr didn’t know about. It was frustrating to think that such an item could exist and Sidr wouldn’t know about it, but if it was just for the self-grooming, it didn’t matter much to the business.

Maldi spoke first.

“I went on a dive to the Dead Derelicts, today.”

“How many times have I told you not to do that?”, Sidr asked rhetorically, “The danger doesn’t justify the margins.”

“Maybe. But I’ll keep doing it, since I need the surplus value.”, Maldi said, half indifferently.

“Value wasted on you if you’re dead. And what of *my* margins, then? You’re my best earner!”

“Enough of the double-speak, Master.”, Maldi replied with tinges of anger and annoyance. They’d had this conversation before. “I can see past your subterfuge. You don’t speak with the other Scavengers like this! You’re giving me special treatment!”

Sidr didn’t deny it. They couldn’t.

“I can tell you care for me, ” Maldi continued, “ but I’m not your child, even if you are old enough to be my progenitor.”

Sidr sighed, “If you’re so clever to see past my fake deference (maybe too clever), then you’re also clever enough that I speak the truth when I give warnings of danger. You can already live a lavish enough life with the money you make.”

“I know better than anyone, Master. But there’s something I need to do. It’s something the money you pay me already can’t buy. I need currency, which I intend to earn. On my own, if I must.”

The tension eased a little. Sidr, who had been making stern eye contact the entire length of the conversation so far, relaxed their posture in their chair and let out a final, heavy sigh. Maldi relaxed too; it was obvious the topic was contentious for them as well. With the ‘preliminaries’ out of the way, business could proceed.

“Well… You’ve come all this way, so you may as well show me the goods.”

Maldi smiled and stated, matter-of-factly, “I bring you a body.”

Sidr sort of froze in place for a moment. The hands they rested on their belly, twiddling their fingers, clasped in tension, and the metronome-like rocking motion they made on the swivel chair stopped completely midway through the points of rest.

“A… body?”, Sidr asked, incredulously, finally composing themself. “You went to the Dead Derelicts where most people don’t dare to trudge through and brough back… what?! A single body?!”

Maldi smiled even more, now, “Yes, but there’s a nuance…”

Sidr was taken aback, a bit. The mysterious Engine at the heart of the Dead Derelicts was always churning out new bodies from Ancients know where. Nobody ever collected the body themselves because those were worthless. Scavengers, those brave enough to venture into such a dangerous place, simply ripped the valuables out and ran back home. Yet here was Maldi with a body in that brown bag they carried. That explained the unusual shape of the bag, but none of the other myriad questions Sidr had.

This body better be made of platinum.

“It’s a live body.”

“Bullshit!” Sidr shot up, out of his chair, which promptly tipped over and fell on the ground. The loud sounds of plastic and metal clanging on the tiled floor only served to accentuate the deafening silence that took over the room.

This was beyond unusual. It was unprecedented. Many bodies had been retrieved from the Dead Derelicts over the years, but there was no report of the Engine there ever releasing a living person. Maldi and Sidr had just uncovered something exceptional. What secrets did this body hold? Only one way to find out.

“W-well, don’t just stand there!” Sidr said, after finally composing themself. They then surprised Maldi in turn by opening the door to the steel cage that separated them and making room in the table that was kept in office. As far as Maldi knew, Sidr had only done this for a Scavenger twice before.

They wasted no time, heaving the body onto the table, each of them holding one end. Maldi opened the zipper on the bag, but it was Sidr that did the honours of pulling open the fabric flaps to reveal the person held inside.

The smell hit the room first. It was the normal smell that came from the bodies retrieved from the Dead Derelicts. Nothing a good hose couldn’t fix, but it certainly soured the ceremonious mood that had taken over the room.

With the bag opened, the body was… unremarkable? Obviously, Sidr wasn’t expecting an alien lifeform. They’d seen bodies from the Dead Derelicts before, so why had they expected something… different.

The body lied there for a bit, in a foetal position, the only two conscious people in the room staring intently at it. It had a small and thin frame, exacerbated by the almost skintight clothes it was wearing. The clothes themselves were so dark in colour that they almost seemed to absorb the light around them. A very distinct blonde head of hair flowed from their scalp. It was so bright in its blondeness one could be forgiven for thinking this was the etymological origin of the phrase “platinum blonde”. Nonetheless, everything about the body was normal.

Sidr and Maldi observed for a bit, watching the slow rhythm of the body’s chest contracting and inflating with air. The faint sound of its breathing had taken over the room in the face of the silence of the other two. Finally, they looked at each other, waiting for a queue to do something.

Sidr was the first to break the silence, “Grab the shoulders. We need to remove them from the sack.”

They both positioned themselves at each end of the body and lifted upwards at the count of three. It was very light – perhaps expectedly, from the appearance – and they were able to put it down gently enough.

Maldi interrupted the quiet next, “Do you want me here for what happens next?”

Sidr smirked and replied, “You make it sound as if I’m about to do something inappropriate. I’ll have you know I’m an honest and reputable Broker!”, in a tone that feigned indignancy.

Maldi returned the smile and retorted, “There’s nothing honest about you. If you weren’t my Master, I’d think of you a margins thief.”

The Broker opened their arms wide across the room. “The mortal has to eat”, Sidr said with an innocent tone before switching back to the serious conversation and adding, “You may go if you wish. I’ll have your payment ready soon enough. And don’t worry about value. For this kind of find, I’ll break open all my piggybanks.”

Maldi smiled sadly. “I may not see you afterwards. With this final payment, I’ll leave the Derelicts behind forever.”

Sidr nodded solemnly, “And you’ll do good to never come back. Very few can leave this life.”

“Farewell, Master.”

“Farewell.”

Maldi took the body bag from the table and folded into their backpack before finally leaving. The room was silent once more, with the faint breathing again regaining hold of the space. Sidr would waste no more time, however. They needed professional help, from this point forward. Going back into the office, they booted up the caller interface and placed a collect call to a certain doctor.

After several rings, the call was answered with a very exasperated “What do you want, you cheap bastard?”

Sidr spoke on their end with a forced posh manner, “Blessed Ancestors, Sir Kali. How do I find you this fine afternoon?”

Kali replied with an angry tone, “It is neither a fine afternoon nor is this a courtesy call. You only bless the Ancestors when you need something from me on short notice, so come out with it already.”

“Such a curt tone from such a fine Physician. I would feel insulted had the very poignant observation not been completely true.”, Sidr continued, still using the posh affect, “Well, if you’re permitting me from skipping the formalities, and may it please the medical board, I have come across something that may arouse your particular fancy.”

“What did you find?”, Kali asked sternly.

“A very fine and well-preserved body, from the Dead Derelicts.”

A massive sigh sounded from Kali’s side of the call, “You sent me a collect call over a ‘well-preserved’ body?” Sidr could practically hear the air quotes. “I know you like to play these fuck-fuck mind games, so give me the real reason why I don’t just send you a bill for my time in this call and a Syndicate goon to break your legs over it?”