

ACT
ONE:

RED TO THE WRIST

Before the screaming started in the back, the server in black was moving—three plates in hand, slick with heat and demi-glace. Sweat beaded his brow, the thin shine of hours on his feet in the crush of a dinner rush.

He nudged the double doors with his heel into the narrow corridor that stitched front of house to back of house. The first time he'd heard those words, they'd stopped him cold. A restaurant wasn't a house—not here, where detached homes were myth, relics from an age of lawns and private plots.

The old man had taught him about those once, and about towers, and the cities that swallowed both. About glideveins and their history, about war tactics and the slow economies that won or lost them. He could name ancient weapons most people had never heard of—glaives, guisarmes, bardiches, and other polearms—because the old man had seen fit to teach him. The same way he'd taught him about treaties, architecture, and the fault lines in maps.

Taught him nearly everything he knew.

And the old man had never been wrong—which was why this term lodged in him like the echo of a rare untruth.

Most land now held towers or sprawling multi-use complexes, façades hiding more than they showed. Green spaces were long since claimed—parks, production fields, testing zones. A freestanding house outside a Zone of Corporate Interest, with its own soil and fence, wasn't rare; it was storybook.

Later he learned the terms came from the theater—"the house" for the audience, "back of house" for the unseen wings. Restaurants stole the language in another modernization age, when cities swelled, steamships and railways collapsed distances, and dining became performance. Service turned into choreography; kitchens into disciplined brigades. The divide between guest and worker became more than practical—it became an illusion of ease over relentless labor.

It had been a modernization age then, as it was again now. History didn't just repeat—it rehearsed. Entire worlds could change in the time it took to cross a threshold. And standing

here, sweating, plates balanced on his arm, he knew the same was true for him.

Half-tile, half-scratch walls. Too bright in some spots, too dim in others.

Wine cooler left, to-go station right.

Metal counters cluttered with torn labels and single-use ramekins.

Around the bend—the dish pit. He dropped plates into the gray bin, wiped his hands on his apron, leaned into the stainless steel. One breath. Two.

Out of the corner of his eye, a new server stood half-hidden behind the to-go station, head bowed over her device. She glanced up, then down fast, thumbs moving. His cheeks warmed. Maybe she was checking messages. Or maybe the post existed now—the one he half-feared, half-expected, with a storm of hashtags he wouldn't want to read but wouldn't be able to ignore.

Some things were out of his control. And besides, he had nothing to be ashamed of.

Gratitude, he reminded himself.

Like the twinge in his lower back fading—a pain he'd once chased to its worst conclusions. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe it would hitch to his spine for weeks. Maybe it was the first loose stone in a landslide ending in years of chronic ache. But worry didn't stick like it used to—not for a man who believed in preparation.

Not everything stayed. Not everything was fixed.

Most things didn't. Most weren't.

Meat-prep left, fridge-freezer and beer cooler right. Extra plates and syrup bottles past the kitchen. Dry storage—flowers, spices, sacks of grain—small alchemies that turned food into something worth serving.

Through the prep station, a narrow doorway to the back hall. Stairs to the lockers above, the cramped chef's office crouched beneath like it was hiding from the light. Then out the rear door into the walled trash pit where staff smoked or stood still. He didn't smoke, but he loved stillness now the way the moon loved its orbit—quiet, constant, inevitable.

The lot outside lay flat and wrong—an asphalt scar in a city built to scrape the sky. Around it, towers rose in dense steel forests. In the middle: a strip mall, a lone restaurant, oceans of parking lot.

A year ago, a breach had dropped five blocks to their knees—not fire, not quake, just... failure. Anywhere else, cleanup speed would've been a miracle. Here, it was a crawl. No cranes. No scaffolding. Just emptiness lingering like a canvas no one dared paint on.

Scars like that heal slowly—if at all. They set in the shape of what's missing. His reconstruction was the same. Slow.

And today, more than once, it had almost been undone.

It started in his two-bedroom, fifteen minutes by glide-vane from the restaurant—an hour if he walked. He usually walked. The morning trip armored him; the night return let him shed it.

He'd signed the lease the day he arrived in the city. Same day he got the job. No tours, no interviews—keys in hand like the choice had been made before he knew he'd make it.

The apartment was bare in the way a held breath is bare. A couch salvaged from the curb, cushions restored. Walls stripped except for a few thrifted mirrors. No rugs, just scuffed hardwood.

Boxes lined the walls—plastic pulled from sidewalks, cardboard from the restaurant's back hall. One held paintbrushes and half-squeezed tubes of color. Another, fabric and spools of thread, an old sewing machine from the ninety-second floor of a two-hundred-story tower—still waiting for repair.

A box of clay.

A box of interlocking blocks.

A box of candles.

Yarn.

Dirt he shouldn't have brought inside.

Bands. Dumbbells. Yoga blocks.

One of beads. One of string. One of shiny things with no use yet. A crate with six books—none read, though one lived in his bag, marked as the "first."

A lot of boxes. A lot of starts. A lot of ways to build. Like him.

The TV stand came with the place; the only thing on it was the long black leather tote he'd rolled into town with—nearly the length of his torso, hung with charms that clinked when he moved. He carried it everywhere. Preparation in physical form. The lesson learned too late. Back when the world he'd built still stood, he thought he knew what readiness was. Then came the

moment that proved otherwise. You only learn the true shape of preparation when you see what it might have saved.

Last night ended later than planned—an unplanned double. The fridge held nothing but juice and raw ingredients, and he didn't have it in him to cook. He went to bed hungry.

Right before sleep, he tossed the day's pants into the washer. Without thinking, restarted the load instead of moving the other two pairs to the dryer. All three washed. All three wet. His logic: they'd dry in the morning while he showered.

But exhaustion let him sleep past the alarm. By the time he came to, there wasn't space to do both—shower and still make it in time. He wasn't the type to rush a rinse, so he went with the sink-and-towel routine. Quick, but decent. Only then did he remember the pants.

Which left him with the oldest pair—the ones from his first day. A year ago, they fit. Now they gripped his thighs and ass like they were holding a grudge.

The urge to swear rose sharp in his chest. He stopped, counted the breath in—three, four—out—three, four. Not worth it. Not worth starting the day lit like a fuse.

He dressed anyway, slung the bag, and set out.

Normally, he walked—an hour from door to restaurant, the kind of stretch that braced him for the day ahead. But he was late, so he aimed for the glidevein.

Down for "unspecified maintenance."

His teeth met. He wanted to call it sabotage, incompetence—anything to match the frustration. Instead, he shifted his bag, fixed on the weight of it at his shoulder, the charms tapping in rhythm with his steps.

The only detour would send him halfway across the city.

So he walked.

Towers rose around him. Sirens wailed in waves. Steam hissed from vents. Ten thousand voices moved in ten thousand rhythms.

Bikes sliced gaps. Bells nipped ankles.

Glideveins pulsed overhead—clear tubes with water rushing like liquid rails.

Vehicles moved on four wheels, two, or none at all, drifting smooth as thought through the grid.

Ten minutes in—caution tape.

Spill? Leak? Wreck? No one said.

RED TO THE WRIST

Another breath, slow.

Another grounding—his eyes fixed on an alley mural: gold paint on crumbling brick, a woman's face turning into birds.

Three extra blocks. Streets he half-knew.

Shop windows. More murals.

The kind of details you only noticed when you were already late—and forcing yourself not to burn over it.

Then she appeared.

Across the street. Arresting enough to slow him mid-stride.

A glance. Held.

Vehicles blurred between them.

He didn't see the pile of shit.

Shoe slid. Legs split.

Pull in his back.

A ripping sound—just seams stretching.

Thankfully, no rip.

Her mouth curled. A laugh.

Heat climbed his neck.

He fixed his shoe. Tucked his shirt.

Pants cuffs high.

He bent—

The loosened seam gave way.

Loud. Final.

Normally, not a disaster.

Normally, there'd be underwear.

But he had none.

He'd always seen them as redundant.

That's what pants were for.

So they ripped.

Breeze.

Dangle.

A couple behind him gasped.

The woman clutched her chest, stage-faint.

Someone shouted, "Gahhhhhhd damn!"

Another screamed like death had come for them.

Tires shrieked. Metal crumpled.

He ducked into an alley with his bag.

When he came out, lights from a medical rig stuttered across brick.

A responder's voice: "All right, we gotta call it. Time of—"

The rest—the husband screaming, the sobbing, the spectacle—was lost as he broke into a run.

One person down. Another sprinting.

All still moving.

He had to get to work.

Still late.

As he ran, he knew. Knew someone had caught it in crystal clarity, ready to spin him through the feeds by noon.

He could already see the comments:

How does he sit down? That's not a pink stink, that's a pink blessing. My guy's got a winter pelt. Who gave him clearance for those?

The hashtags practically wrote themselves—

#FreeThemBoys

#SwingLowButNotThatLow

#PeltedAndProud

#DumperDiplomacy

#GreatGooglyMoogly

#HonkIfItSwings

#PeachWithAHandle

Some joker would stitch it with a slo-mo zoom, add a popular song, loop it into humiliation. Others would fixate on his ass instead, swearing it deserved its own verified mark.

By the time he reached the restaurant—fifteen minutes late—the day was already primed for combustion.

The heat rose fast when he saw the tables. No cloths, no place settings. Not a fork, napkin, or wineglass in sight. His stomach dropped, and for half a heartbeat, the fire in his chest wanted to take the lead.

Find something steady.

His gaze snagged on a seam in the carpet, perfectly parallel to the bar rail. An imperfection to focus on, to distract from life's own. It steadied him enough to think: GuestGuard.

Officially, a hospitality innovation—impact-absorbing, structure-preserving, liability-proof. Unofficially, the same polymer the parent company sold to schools under another name. That version was stricter, heavier, built for children; this

one was lighter, sleeker, rebranded through a shell subsidiary so businesses could pretend they weren't buying the same thing.

GuestGuard had boomed after the litigation years—when catastrophic falls bankrupted half the city's bars and clubs. Now it was everywhere.

For restaurants, it kept the structure pristine. Which meant every closer had to strip the tables bare before locking up, stack plates and glassware in safe zones mapped by management, and tuck silverware into padded bins.

He'd pulled a pointless double yesterday—unexpectedly—and still slipped out before close. Missed the heads-up. Missed the whole operation.

The flare came back sharper this time, chewing at his ribs. His hand twitched toward the nearest chair, the urge to shove it back into place hard enough to be heard.

Instead—breath again. This time, he picked out five things in the room that were the same color.

One: the black edge of the host stand.

Two: the matte legs of the two-top nearest him.

Three: the slab of u-shaped marble that made up the bar top.

Four: the exposed black painted metal beams and rafters above.

Five: his entire ensemble—shirt, tie, pants, belt, shoes.

The old man's voice lived in that trick. Same as the breathing. Same as the "tell yourself a story" method when nothing else worked. He hadn't just taught him history or names or places—he'd taught him how not to burn himself alive in public.

Deep inhale. Exhale. Three more, to four.

If you still see red, then count to more.

The rhyme had been the old man's invention, back when he was just a boy. A joke, a lesson, and a lifeline all at once. He still mouthed it sometimes, under his breath, the words more reflex than thought.

And he needed it now.

Because this morning, it was all on him—putting it back together after it had been torn apart.

He remembered something the old man used to say:

Misery loves company. But irony—irony throws a banquet.

It shows up in everyone's life, sits at the head of the table, and makes sure you know it's there. You just have to know where to look.

Black undercloths, white toppers. Two forks, one butter knife, one folded napkin per seat. One wineglass, one water glass. Every two-top, every four-top. Plus the bar reset. Alone. Forty-five minutes to open.

There'd been so many points today where the old him would've lost it. But he hadn't. Not yet. He was trying to lay new beams in himself, because the frame of the life he was meant to have was already ash.

He said goodbye to stillness.

Back through the door—past the chef's office crouched under the stairs, past the prep line, dry goods, syrups, cold storage—until the noise swelled again.

Near the pit, Rasnim, Bharlie, and Yaya huddled around a device.

The screen flickered—buffering, skipping—but the voice cut through:

"—ten years since the disappearance of biotech pioneer Ansel Marrow, energy heir Korran Vint, and the four unnamed chimpanzees believed to be the result of their final, unregulated trial..."

The story and the anchor's tone shifted with breaking news.

"—confirmed breaches at multiple wildlife sanctuaries, metropolitan zoos, and offshore research stations. Early reports suggest coordination..."

"That's today," Rasnim said.

"They hit the sanctuaries?" Bharlie asked.

"Turn it up," Yaya said.

Static. Then:

"...including high-security enclosures. Unknown number of animals missing. Investigation ongoing."

They weren't watching anymore—they were waiting. Glancing up, hoping someone would ask. Hoping to be the one to say it first.

He didn't bite. Didn't even look.

Then the screaming started.

Not pain—just two servers going off, spitfire-fast, voices sharp enough to etch glass. Fighting over the walk-in ten-top at Table 32. One had just clocked in—late. The other had already

greeted the table and fired drinks. Standard shit: territory, ego, ten-top tips.

He didn't flinch. Anger, he'd noticed, always came loudest in tight spaces. Something about heat and clatter forced it out—like steam from a cracked pipe.

Still, screaming never made sense to him. It felt inefficient. Undignified. If you're going to be angry—be angry. Don't bark over scraps and call it justice. Don't pantomime rage in hopes someone bends to your mood.

Do something.

Change something.

Or don't.

Maybe yelling was safer.

Because when he got angry, things didn't escalate.

They ended.

And that was the problem he kept trying to solve:

Are endings always bad?

Is anger meant to flare and fade? Or to cauterize what's festering underneath?

He used to think anger made him strong.

Now he wasn't so sure.

Maybe it just revealed the shape of a person—the pressure points, the cracks, the truths they hid from themselves.

When the yelling stopped, quiet returned—brief, brittle.

Not silence—never that. Just the churn of a night in motion. Sizzling from pans. Shoes on tile. Voices bent low or clipped short. The clink of Meli restocking ramekins. Pana stirring sweet tea by hand because the dispenser cracked three months ago and no one ever ordered a new one. Larisol at the triple sink, half-singing, half-drowning herself in rhythm.

He wiped the sweat off his brow with the inside of his arm. Straightened his spine. Tugged at the collar of his shirt.

Then stepped back through the doors and walked.

On his left, the semi-private dining room flickered with candlelight and laughter. On the right, shadows spilled from the fully private suite—moneyed shadows, power-suited and low-voiced.

He kept going. Past the main dining room, where Table 50 already felt like a problem. Past the POS screens and into the bar to grab an espresso martini for a table.

Tonight, he was set on top form.

Hair perfect. Sleeves rolled. Apron spotless. Smile tuned. Jokes light.

By 6:30, the steakhouse thrummed—bone-in ribeyes on cast iron, wine dark as blood, oak and brass gleaming.

He was six hours into a double.

Bartender by day. Server by night.

A year ago, he'd just needed a paycheck and somewhere to lie low.

Now he ran both sides of the house—front and back, fire and ice.

The longest he'd stayed anywhere in years.

He called it a fresh start. New city. Clean slate.

Not a lie. But not the whole truth.

He'd arrived with nothing but a name, a leather bag, a couple changes of clothes, a few mementos—and memories he kept trying to convince himself weren't real.

And a quiet promise:

No more mistakes. No more damage.

No more outbursts.

He meant it. Mostly.

Sometimes his mind drifted back home—to the hush of his family's halls, the crisp smell of stone and ink, the weight of rooms lined with books bound in leather and expectation. He'd read there for years, memorizing dense, demanding texts—not just for knowledge, but for inheritance.

Learned them like scripture. Like prayer. Like incantation.

And still, it hadn't been enough.

But memory didn't mend what he'd broken.

Didn't bring the place closer.

Didn't make him welcome again.

So he didn't dwell. Not unless the memories came first. They were close now, pressing at the edge of thought—

"You're glowing tonight," said the woman at Table 12, brushing his arm.

She always flirted, always tipped well. Seventy-something, technically—he knew from a spring birthday conversation—but she didn't look a day past thirty. Smooth face, sharp jaw, posture effortless, desire obvious. Age had become a detail, not a feature, at least for those who could afford the upkeep.

The others—the ones who wore every year in their skin—vanished before anyone noticed. Forgotten.

He played along.

“You know I sweat when I sparkle,” he said, sliding her second espresso martini into place without breaking stride. The shaker hissed as he holstered it at the bar.

Table 12 was in the lounge—technically not his section—but he’d picked it up earlier, along with Table 17, after the lunch server asked him to cover stragglers. What should’ve been a gentle overlap became a squeeze—five tables hitting at once. Three turned quickly; the last two lingered into dinner.

He was about to reset Table 17 when the host stand caught his eye. A tall, curvy woman stood framed in the glass doors, sunlight glancing off the faint metallic filigree running like vines down her throat and arms. Ornamental to the untrained. Diagnostic to anyone who knew better. He’d learned the signs years ago, when the old man gave him one of his less-funny lessons:

There were many names for them, depending on where you were standing. Hormistresses in some cities, Chemisirens in others. Glandmothers if they’d been around before the regulations—before the infrastructure was laced with dampeners. Bitter men called them Heat Leeches. Hunters called them Alpha Does. Paranoid men—men who’d been burned—whispered about MK-Marys, women who could turn your own body into a weapon against you.

Officially, the woman at the host stand was a Femalen. Officially, she was being turned away because of it.

He watched the host keep their voice low, polite but firm. The woman’s mouth tightened—anger in her eyes—but she didn’t argue. She knew about the dampening. Everyone did. And she knew, same as he did, that a ‘*No-Femalen*’ policy meant the quiet presence of a uniform somewhere close. Maybe outside, maybe just down the block, ready to “escort” her away if she lingered.

She turned, her reflection catching his in the glass before the door shut behind her.

Back home, he might have stepped in. Back home, he’d acted often and without hesitation—doing anything he could simply because he could, never asking if he should. Never thinking about what happened after. Whether the change would hold without him.

Here, he told himself, he was only here to experience life outside of home—beautiful and ugly both. He wondered sometimes how much responsibility that came with. Whether knowing you could—say something, do something—meant you had to.

He wasn't sure anymore.

What he was sure of was his section for the night:

center floor—five tables, three already full.

And he was floating.

Moving like water.

Steps precise. Pace measured.

Order in. Water down. Salad out. Entrees fired.

Breathe.

There was choreography to it—time the courses, crumb the table like a ghost, swap silver before they noticed, refill drinks two-thirds down.

When it was busy like this, time bent. An hour became five. A double shift vanished in a blink.

He liked that—the puzzle, the balance, the satisfaction of a table leaving happy without asking for a thing.

But he also liked the moments no one talked about.

The overheard slices of strangers' lives.

A server's soundtrack, stitched from booths and barstools.

"...I told her I'd take the dog," muttered a man with a smoker's rasp and a mole on his chin, "but I didn't think she'd actually—"

"...We have the numbers," said a sharp-suited exec with glossy black nails, "and it's a symphony. No one's gonna expect _"

"...All I'm saying is, if you don't get your shit together and figure out a way to handle that," warned a tired-looking woman in a utility vest, jabbing her fork for emphasis, "then we're gonna have to open things back up again. And that means Big Rod Randrell is moving back into the basement."

"Would you please just call him Ran—" the man began.

"...If he proposes without talking to my ex," snapped a woman in pink curls and oversized sunglasses, "I swear to God _"

"...Last week he said he'd free the zoo animals," groaned a teen girl with tie-dye nails and a faint lisp, "but how the fuck was I supposed to know he wasn't joking—"

"...When I tell you that man put me through the mattress," wheezed a busty woman with a nasal cackle, "had fat ma goin –" then she made a purring sound.

"...She said 'I love you,'" murmured a freckled girl with chipped polish, "and he blinked like she'd handed him a gun–"

"...If she did that to me?" drawled a man with a lazy eye and a gold tooth, "that bitch would be in a blimp right now–"

"...No, because you never said the apology. You danced around it," said a broad-shouldered man with trembling hands. "And now I've gotta sit here and guess if you even know what you did?"

"...And who the fuck chooses to go to the Extere Zone?" grunted a red-faced bald guy with gravy on his tie. "Hippies and dirtbags. Good riddance."

"...It's not a sex thing," a man whispered, urgent. "It's just– she likes when I cry a little."

"...She's not wrong about the patient," admitted a lean man in medical scrubs. "But fuck, the way she says it makes me want to chew glass."

"...And I told him," sighed a dad in a sports team jacket, "if he wants to wear nail polish, it's fine. But he can't just use mine without asking."

He never got the full stories.

Just fragments.

Hints.

The broken poetry of other people's lives.

The trailing edge of drama, joy, regret. And in between orders, his mind filled the blanks. Cast the roles. Wove the arcs. There was an unseen magic in it—people in the messy middle. Trying. Pretending.

Failing beautifully.

Breaking bread all the while.

That was the real pleasure of the job.

Not just the rhythm of it—the flow—but the glimpse. The overheard truths. The soft spots people didn't mean to show.

He was invisible and essential. Present but impersonal. A ghost with good timing.

And he was good at it.

He liked being good at things. Liked being liked. It helped keep the old feelings buried.

Made him feel like less of what he used to be.

But that wasn't the full truth.

When he first arrived—from home—he hated it.

All of it.

The climate. The extremes. The way people talked, and the way they didn't. The scale, the ego, and the lack of it, too. Everything was loud and cold and shameless and too bright at night. Even the sky looked artificial here, crossed by glass arteries that pulsed with seawater and glinted like veins under fluorescent skin.

But miracles happened here.

The muted kind at least.

The old man he'd ended up living with—kind, wise, crass—had squatted on strong knees until they were eye level and said, "You wanna survive? Find one beautiful thing a day. Don't wait for it. Make it. Even if it's just a flower punching through sidewalk. Or the skyline catching light just right, like God's behind it. Or a new favorite shade of pink hidden inside someone you love. Doesn't matter. Pick something. Hold it. Or this place'll eat you whole."

At the time, it sounded like nonsense. Especially the pink part. Still didn't get that one. But he'd started looking anyway. First out of desperation. Then habit.

Now—belief.

The beautiful things had changed over time. Not always objects. Sometimes a rhythm. Sometimes a moment of grace in the noise. Sometimes a stranger's conversation that made the world feel good again, if only for a second.

He blinked. Let that go.

Truth was, he'd always been this way. Precise. Adaptable. Charming when it counted. People liked him. There were always people better.

And one of those people hated him enough to want him dead.

He shook that off too.

His legs ached. Hunger pulled beneath his ribs. He hadn't peed in hours. And the next table hadn't even arrived yet.

The table.

Table 41.

He saw them before the host pointed—two men, two women. Expensive smiles. Stiff shoulders. Loud in the wrong way.

He knew. You could always tell.

He approached the booth with measured pace, already scanning.

Both couples sat side-by-side—men on the outside, women wedged between wall and man. The men faced each other, heads tilted in close conversation, one speaking low and fast, the other nodding like he was winning a bet. The women next to them were giggling, mouths half-covered by manicured hands, eyes already glossed from the first round of drinks.

He noticed the details without looking like he was noticing anything. The coats, casually draped, were designer. The watches: expensive but understated. The laughs: half a second too soon and a decibel too loud. Words like “fund” and “renovation” floated above the tabletop.

He knew the type.

He adjusted his approach—close enough to register in their periphery, not so close as to intrude. A delicate balance. He hovered just long enough for their heads to turn. All four looked at him, briefly.

That was the opening.

“Good evening, welcome in,” he said, voice smooth as wine. “My name’s—”

A raised finger.

The taller man didn’t look at him—just paused him like a playlist. They kept talking for another beat or two. Then, with surgical precision, the man turned and cut in:

“Diet Tavi. No lemon. Water. No ice. One lemon. One lime. Two straws.”

He nodded once. “Of course. I’ll grab those while you look over the menus.”

“We already know,” said the second man, not lifting his eyes. “We’re not here to chat.”

He nodded again. Still didn’t blink.

“Steak frites, medium. Filet, medium rare. Two Caesars. One with chicken, one with salmon. No croutons. Cheese on the side for one. Dressing on the side for both. Extra anchovy. And get us some bread on the table.”

The man listed it like a grocery order—rapid, rehearsed, without pause.

He waited a beat. Repeated it back. Then, gently:

“And for the Caesars, would either of you be interested in our table-side preparation? It’s made fresh in front of—”

"No," one of the women cut in. Not rude, exactly.

Just abrupt.

Brisk. Her voice sharp with decision. "And a side of asparagus."

The second woman didn't acknowledge him at all. Her eyes slid past him like he was part of the wall. Or worse—part of the floor.

To people like them, people like him were just furniture and function.

He rang it in without mistake.

And seventeen minutes later when the food came—perfectly timed, flawlessly fired, plated with care—it apparently wasn't right.

Both steaks were "off."

The man with the medium swore it was medium well.

The one with the medium rare claimed it was medium.

Neither cut had cooled. The color was textbook. But they pressed their knives in slow, theatrical slices, then leaned back with smug disappointment—like they'd caught him in the act.

Then came the salads.

The women picked at the romaine like it had personally betrayed them.

"This isn't chopped," one said flatly.

He offered to have the salad chef to chop them up, but they were already waving him off.

"No, just remake it," said the other. "Since the steaks are going back anyway."

He tried to let them keep the originals while the kitchen refired. They refused.

"If it's going to be a few minutes," she said with a shrug, "we'd rather start over."

"And you may as well bring us out another loaf of bread," one of them added, almost absently.

"At this rate," said the woman across from him, dry as salt, "that might be our dinner."

Deep breath in.

He didn't flinch.

Didn't argue. Not because they were right—because it never helped. Not with people like this. Not on nights like this.

Smiled.

Nodded.

Deep breath out.

Made two trips to clear the table.

The steaks. The salads. The asparagus. The empty bread plate.

Every plate lifted—untouched or half-picked, not a bite finished—and carted back to the kitchen like failure.

First offense of the night. Still early. Still salvageable.

He smiled the whole way back.

But inside, something leaned sideways.

If it had just been that one table, maybe the night wouldn't have unraveled. But it wasn't just them—it was everything else. The things guests never see.

Like the bread.

Same table asked again. Half-joking, half-accusing.

"Did you forget already?"

"Never," he said, smooth as stock. "There's some in the oven now."

A lie. But a safe one. There usually was.

Then another table wanted bread too. He'd called for it three times in ten minutes, in between clearing plates, dropping checks, running drinks, ferrying desserts. Nothing. Eventually you stop explaining. Stop apologizing. You just carry the silence like it's yours, even when it's not.

Technically, bread was service support's job. But support tonight was a constellation of duds. The expo manager with IBS was locked in the bathroom with stomach trouble. The GM—who should've been floating, smiling, checking tables—was sweating through his button-down, barking into the kitchen like it was war. Every clipped word a lit fuse.

Of the five support staff on shift, one was slicing parsley like it was sacred scripture. Two were locked in a silverware trance. The other two had vanished—probably out back getting high so they could "optimize" napkins.

Meanwhile, the broiler cook was coming apart. Shouldn't have been on steaks tonight. Early in the shift, they came out gray and rubbery. Now they bled across the plate. "Speed up," the managers said, so he did—ditching spec, swinging hotter and faster. The bourbon on his breath made sense. His wife had left last month. A man has to cope. So they let him burn. Medium rare and melting down.

And then there was Zaya. Fellow server. Sharp. Stunning. She didn't need this job—she'd said as much. She worked here for the rhythm. The flow. He understood. They'd had easy talks before shifts, about her past loves and clean breaks. She'd told him she only wanted something simple, physical.

An invitation for him.

She'd been clear.

And he hadn't figured out how to say no without sounding like an idiot. It wasn't purity. Not religion. Just... wanting his first time to mean something.

Not a shrug. Not a scratch. Not a crash pad.

So tonight he stayed moving. If she was at the beverage station, he rerouted. If she went west, he went east. Looped around tables with fake errands, took the long way through the bar. Opposite poles of a magnet, never touching.

Because she wasn't the type to leave things unsaid. If they got stuck alone—even for a second—she'd ask. Not cruelly. Just honestly. And he wasn't ready to be honest. Not tonight.

So he kept moving. Balancing trays and lies, stacking priorities like plates in the crook of his arm. Trying to tell hesitation from hope. Trying to weigh values against heat and noise. Trying to figure out how much a dream is worth, once reality walks in.

And all the while, the night pressed in.

The air didn't help. Guests might've felt a little warm, a little close. To the servers, it was war. The AC wasn't broken, just weak—lagging under the heat of bodies, burners, and bad moods.

He was soaked. Shirt clinging, apron damp, napkins tucked in his pocket like gauze.

The dish pit was a swamp—steam, grease, heat, constant noise. Bussing his own tables meant constant trips to the back, where backups turned into elbow-to-elbow chaos just to rinse a plate. The air was thick, the tile slick, the smell a cocktail of sanitizer, fryer oil, and fatigue.

Voices too loud. Or too quiet. Fake laughs. Crying in corners. Two servers mid-fight, pretending they weren't. Others whispering about someone three feet away. Someone flirting. Someone breaking down. Someone pretending they weren't three seconds from quitting.

And through it all, he kept moving. He had to.

All that—before the guests even counted.

He'd started the night with three tables. Manageable. But somewhere between refires and reroutes, he looked up—five full.

Service now overlapped: drinks with apps, entrées with desserts, checks with refills. Everything at once, all the time.

At least the cocktail tables had left before the rush. Starting the shift with them hadn't helped.

Table 40 was on their fourth round of sweet tea, the man gulping like it was about to be banned—loud slurps carrying three tables over.

Table 50 had kids—sticky-fingered, seconds from screaming if the ranch wasn't ranchy enough. They needed more crayons. More ketchup. More everything.

Table 51 flagged him down like someone was choking. They weren't. They just wanted to know where the scallops and calamari were sourced. They "ran a seafood distribution business." They were "just wondering."

And then there was Table 52.

They shouldn't have been sat. Policy was clear: no partial parties. But the hostess—one of two scheduled—was all nerves and no logic, skipping rotations, double-setting, smiling wide while she broke the floor plan in half.

He'd tried to wave her off, but she was already seating them. Four arrived first. Fifteen minutes later, they gave up on the rest of their group and ordered anyway.

Halfway through salads, two more showed. By the time entrées were five minutes out, the final three strolled in—laughing, sunburned, reeking of cologne and entitlement.

Now it was a nine-top.

Nine moods. Nine drink orders. Nine sets of expectations.

The new arrivals wanted starters. Then soup. Then time to decide on entrées. No apology for being late, just the chatty ease of people who'd never worked food service.

They smiled. Said please and thank you. Meant well.

That was the problem.

They didn't see him. He was too good at fading, the way service people do when they're doing it right. So they didn't see the pressure building. They asked questions they could've found online or asked each other. Not quick clarifications—whole spiels.

He'd stop, crouch, explain the prix fixe and substitutions in detail—only for them to nod and say, "Yeah, I'll probably do something else."

He'd start to walk away—

"Oh wait, I had a question about a drink."

Smile. Answer. Turn.

"Actually—could we get some bread? And more refills?"

Nod. Step away.

"Wait—so sorry—can we also do another round of the calamari and drinks? For everyone."

Sweetly asked. Kindly meant.

None of it meant to hurt.

And all of it made him want to bash their heads against the table.

Not from malice—just that primitive, self-preserving urge to make the noise stop.

He pictured it like a fable for one: grabbing a head by the hair, slamming it down—only for it to bounce off the GuestGuard-coated surface like a balloon in a gym.

Squeak.

They'd blink, confused, like they'd missed the punchline.

"Whoa—what was that, bud? Everything okay? You seem tense. Wanna talk about it?"

Harder this time.

Squeak.

Now they'd frown with concern.

One leaned in. "Listen, man—I was a server back in college. I get it. Nights like this happen."

Another, with the syrupy tone of preschool hour: "Life is full of big emotions. Are we making smart choices right now?"

A hand on his arm. "We don't want to have to ask for your manager."

He imagined roaring at them, taking a head in each hand, smashing them together like cymbals—*squeak, squeak, squeak*—while they kept trying to soothe him.

"Hey, deep breaths, buddy."

"We're all friends here."

"Maybe get a glass of water?"

The chorus blurred into one long squeaky lullaby.

And somehow, the ridiculousness of the image loosened a few teeth from the real rage still grinding inside him.

He remembered:

Deep inhale. Exhale. Three more, to four.

If you still see red, then count to more.

He took his breaths. Counted.

Put in their new appetizer and round of drinks.

Refilled sodas. Skipped the bread, hoping they'd forget.

They didn't need that many carbs anyway.

He kept moving.

By now, he wasn't managing a table.

He was shadowing a stage play. Dodging spotlight cues in a scene that didn't know it was already bleeding into the next act.

He was trying to keep from unraveling.

All because the wrong hostess showed up.

He was switching gears every three minutes. Smiling through it all. His face felt like a performance piece.

And still—Table 41 outshined them all in sheer, effortless asshole energy.

All of it went back out to the table.

Every plate.

Both steaks, again. Both salads, again. The asparagus. Even the lemon wedges.

And again, it wasn't right.

The men laid out their new grievances like a prosecution team prepping visuals.

The filet guy—the taller one—was holding court with a pained look on his face, pointing at the pink center like it had personally insulted him.

"This is raw," he said. "I'm not eating that."

He offered to bring it back up to temp—just a quick re-fire on the grill, a minute or two. Standard procedure.

But the man looked at him like he was an idiot man speaking an idiot language.

"No. I don't want that one back. I want a fresh filet."

No reason given. No logic offered. Just a challenge.

Another test.

And again, he had a choice: explain, resist, rage.

Instead, he smiled. "Of course, sir."

Then the second man—steak frites guy—gestured toward his own plate.

The meat was sliced into clean strips, fanned across the porcelain like a medical exhibit.

Beside it sat a tablet, propped upright like a small silver fifth wheel. On the screen: a diagram of steak doneness. Temperature. Color. Cross-sectioned images.

A digital autopsy.

The man didn't ask a question. Just leaned back and waved a hand toward the display.

"So tell me," he said, syrupy smooth. "What does that look like to you?"

A trap.

The kind where the answer doesn't matter—only the act of making you say it.

He glanced at the diagram. Then the steak.

Both textbook medium. No question.

Still, he answered gently. Evenly. The way he'd trained himself to.

No edge. No sigh. Not even a flicker of judgment in the eyes.

"Medium, sir."

The man smiled. Lifted his glass.

"Of course. You people just never get it."

There it was.

Not about the food. Never was.

The steak frite guys eyes swept the server top to bottom—slow enough to catch the sweat-damp collar, the frayed apron strap, the tired shoes. A full scan. A full dismissal.

The table behind them went still. Someone coughed. Someone else paused mid-bite.

That must have been the cue for the women.

The salads were fine this time—or at least, that's what they said. They were keeping them, technically. But only to the side. "We'll wait to eat until the men get theirs," one said, with the airy grace of someone doing another person a favor.

"A medium and a medium rare shouldn't take that long," the other added. "Unless they're not doing them fresh?"

A warning disguised as small talk.

He didn't argue. Didn't explain that in a packed house, ten tickets were already ahead of theirs. That the expo manager was in the bathroom, losing a war with her asshole. That the GM was seconds from detonation. That the broiler cook was coming apart at the seams. That freshness was both the problem and the reason.

They'd set the terms now.

If the steaks came late, if the salads arrived cold—they wouldn't just want replacements.

They'd expect them.

Deep inhale. Exhale. Three more, to four.

If you still see red, count to more.

First breath in.

He nodded, thin smile.

Didn't look directly at any of them. Couldn't.

Still, he didn't flinch.

Didn't blink yet.

Just turned. Exhaled.

Walked back to the kitchen.

Laughed.

Not from amusement—just to keep from exhaling fire.

On the way, still chasing three more deep breaths, he pictured the pregame huddle Table 41 must've had before walking in tonight.

Center field. Stadium lights so bright they wash the grass in silver. The four of them crouched low like they're about to run a championship play—two men, two women, date-night sleek but with eyes burning like they've trained all season for this.

The stands are packed. Fifty thousand spectators who look just like them—whole generations who get their kicks from making a stranger's night harder than it needs to be. The roar is constant, a low wave of anticipation. Somewhere, in another part of the city, their rivals—four other assholes in another restaurant—are running their own set. At the end of the night, both teams will compare stats.

"Alright, team," steak-frites guy says, voice low and urgent. "We walk in like we've never seen a menu. Order whatever we want—then pretend it's wrong. No matter what."

"Doesn't matter if it's perfect," says the salmon caesar woman. "We stall. We complain. We play dumb. That's the move."

Filet guy nods solemnly, like this is the oral tradition of his people. "We delay our pleasure and his flow. Total disruption. Bonus points if we stay polite while we do it—makes it harder to push back."

"And if anyone tries to correct us?" says the other woman, brows lifted in mock innocence. "We get hurt. Wounded. Deeply disappointed."

"And when the timing's right—boom. We call the manager."

"He'll come out, apologize for something that didn't happen, comp the whole meal."

"And probably the next one too."

"Because that's just what we do."

They stack their hands in the middle. The crowd leans in. Someone somewhere is blowing an air horn.

"One-two-three—"

"GASLIGHT!!!"

The huddle breaks. They jog to the metaphorical line of scrimmage—smooth, confident, predators in heels and cufflinks—ready to take the field.

It was the only explanation that made sense.

Either that, or they were toddlers in adult suits—shiny shoes, loud opinions, taste buds made of cardboard. Which, honestly, felt just as likely.

He made it to one and a half deep breaths before bailing. Set the plate down on the pass line—calm hands, tight jaw—and rattled off, in clipped shorthand, the table's gripes to Jim the GM on expo, and to the broiler cook.

No debate. No discussion. Just the facts, then gone.

He drifted to the sink, leaning back until the stainless pressed into his lower spine, coolness seeping through his shirt like relief.

Jazz glanced over without lifting her eyes, wrist flicking the soda gun like it owed her money.

"How's your section?"

"Fine, the usual," he muttered. "Except—I'm about five minutes from literally murdering everyone at table 41. Two steak re-cooks and counting."

She blinked, then frowned. "Damn. That bad?"

"They're the type to bitch all night, tip five percent, leave a handwritten note on the receipt about how terrible I was, and

then as a final ‘fuck-you’ they’ll leave a one star review online saying I sucked and that all their shit was cold.”

“Okay but like—real shit—was it cold? You know Emilio’s on sides and...”

“Sober tonight. Miraculously. I checked—they everything was hot. You could cauterize a wound with those asparagus.”

Jazz let out a short laugh through her nose and gave him a light elbow—just enough pressure to register through his shirt. They weren’t friends, not really. Friendly at work, sure, but that was different. Still, the familiar jab was solid enough to ground him, to remind him he was here, in his body, not in the stadium in his head.

For a second, that was all he needed.

Enough to breathe.

Enough to think,

Alright, you got this. Don’t let this get you down. I’m killing them with kindness.

He straightened.

Jazz nodded toward the pass line. “Want me to take the re-fire back for you when it comes up?”

He shook his head. “Nah. I got it. Just need to breathe and remind myself not all people suck.”

He pushed off the sink, letting the cool steel leave his back, and went back into the floor. No standing around—there were bills to drop, desserts to run, fresh silverware to set. One table cashed out, another got sat before their chairs cooled.

He even swung by 41, topped their waters, asked if everything was alright. They smiled, said something that might’ve been a joke, might’ve been a jab. Hard to tell with that table—every word felt like part of the playbook. He didn’t linger long enough to find out.

Somewhere in between clearing plates and greeting a new two-top, his breathing mantra threaded itself back in—inhalation for four, exhalation for four, again and again, enough to keep his hands steady.

Then—finally—the third round of steaks came out flawless.

Chef double-checked each plate himself. Jim, the GM, hovered at the pass, arms folded, watching the plating like it was a final exam. He even gave a small, solemn nod.

The kitchen had rallied. Not because he demanded it—he never did—but because they could see it in his eyes tonight. He

was close to the edge, and that wasn't like him. So they pulled strings. Cut corners. Skipped the queue.

Even the broiler cook, shaking and red-eyed, managed to hold steady long enough to send the steaks out textbook perfect.

He carried the plates like ancient and delicate things.

Balanced. Deliberate. A single breath. A single prayer.

When he arrived, the women looked up first—then the men.

He placed the filet in front of the taller man, gently, then turned to serve the steak frites.

The filet guy blinked. Looked at the plate. Then at him.

Something passed in his face. A flicker of discomfort. Maybe even guilt.

"Looks great," he said. And meant it.

For a second, it seemed like the night might turn. Like maybe—maybe—it had all just been a performance, and now it was over.

But then the steak frites spoke.

He didn't even bother to look. Just jabbed a finger into the crust and shoved the plate an inch away.

"I asked for medium," he said, smug and slow. "Not... this."

The plate made a polite clink against the wood.

The words didn't.

"Sir," he said, calm but tight, "this is medium."

The man smiled.

All enamel. No warmth.

"You sure you're in the right career?"

There it was again.

That flick of a blade, disguised as courtesy. Just sharp enough to draw blood. Just dull enough to make you doubt it ever happened.

He didn't flinch.

Didn't argue.

Barely breathed.

Kill them with kindness, he reminded himself.

He slowed his movements, forced a smile that felt carved from stone.

As if the tension had summoned her, one of the women cleared her throat.

"Excuse me," she said, peering past her untouched plate. "We were just wondering—what was that salad they made over there?" She gestured vaguely toward a table across the room. "With the cart?"

He glanced. Table-side Caesar. Premium add-on. Anchovy paste, cracked egg, real Dijon—dressed right in front of the guests.

His jaw tightened. His pulse picked up.

Surely she wasn't—

"Table-side Caesar, ma'am."

"Oh," she said, eyes lighting. "That sounds much better than these."

She pushed her salad away as if moving a soiled napkin.

"I think we'll just split one instead," the second woman added. "With the same proteins."

"And fresh ones, please," said the first. "Not the ones already on our plates."

He opened his mouth—then closed it.

An involuntary twitch pulled at his eye.

Somewhere inside, something gave—not loudly, not visibly.

A fine crack deep in the structure.

The filet guy stayed silent, staring at his plate. Then at him. For a moment, their eyes met. There was sympathy there. Regret, maybe. But not enough to stop anything. Not enough to help. Certainly not enough to matter.

He smiled. Nodded.

Deep inhale. Exhale. Three more, to four.

If you still see red, then count to more.

He tried.

Failed.

The breaths came shallow. The only depth left was heat—flowing, building, burning.

He ignored the pounding in his core, turned without a word, and walked calmly back to the line.

Inside, he saw red.

The hallway felt tighter than before, like the walls had leaned in while he was gone—waiting, listening, just to press against his ribs.

There was no draft, but the air moved anyway. Heavy. Close. With weight. With opinions. Wrong in a way you could taste.

Somewhere in the pressure, his muttering started—low, sharp, tumbling fast, phrases tripping over each other like pebbles flung too hard:

“‘You sure you’re in the right career?’ I’ll show you a fuckin’ career, you cologne-clogged bitch...”

“...takes a special kind of dumb to fuck with the person bringing your food...”

“...three blinks and I could have you...”

“...only married you for the money...”

“...can’t even buy class—must’ve been sold out...”

“...I fuckin’ hate people—”

The roll didn’t need sense, only momentum. Heat. Each phrase another splinter jabbed into the meat of his day.

“—this whole place, man. Why do I even try? Like they ain’t even got no fuckin’ sporgle.”

Honestly, that should’ve told him everything.

He drew in a long breath that tried, and failed, to cool the bloom of heat across his shoulders. Looked down at the steak in his hands. Perfect medium. Still hot. Still salvageable.

“Don’t conflate,” he whispered—an old mantra, a life raft.

“Kill them with kindness” shed the back half of its weight in his mind—lighter now, easier to repeat, and moving in lockstep with his rising heat.

At the threshold, the air seemed to thicken again. His fingers had gone numb around the plate, but he didn’t set it down. Not yet. The pressure was in him now—behind his eyes, down his spine, turning the temperature of the room into something dreamlike.

The muscle in his temple twitched. Edges of his vision pulsed with light.

There were options.

Scream.

Throw the plate.

Call the manager and burn it all down.

Flip the table. Punch that smug bastard in the teeth.

Walk out the back door and never return.

Cry, maybe. Pretend a little longer. Smile like nothing’s wrong. Swallow the fire.

But none of it would help. None of it would touch the thing inside him—the engine he'd spent years pretending wasn't there.

The plate began to tremble in his hands.

He stepped onto the line. Sounds warped—either too close or too far. A soda hissed too loud. Laughter echoed like a hallway. The overhead bulbs didn't quite flicker, but the shadows shifted as if nervous. Conversations slowed, stuttered.

People noticed something without knowing what.

The light above the pass station gave a faint pulse. Cups rattled gently in their stacks. Glasses rang with a thin, crystalline note, like someone brushing them with tuning forks no one could see.

Jazz glanced up, confused.

He pressed his fists against his thighs, every tendon strung tight. He looked like someone holding back a pointless scream. Maybe he was.

A ramekin clattered to the floor. He raised his head.

The heat had climbed to his throat. His voice came out thin—not from fear, but because speaking was the most human thing left to him.

"I tried—I really tried."

He took a breath.

Made the choice.

Three sharp blinks—like throwing a breaker behind his eyes.

Heat surged in answer. He raised his right hand and closed his fist.

The plates lifted first.

Salad bowls. Dinnerware. Bread plates. Dessert trays.

They rose with the soft hum of static, as if gravity had been momentarily misfiled.

Then the knives.

Spoons.

Forks.

Tongs.

Meat thermometers.

A corkscrew someone swore had been lost last week.

Bone saws from the butcher block.

Polished steel trembled midair like breath caught in a cold room.

Metal sang.

Jim the GM staggered back from the expo station, hands half-raised.

Someone gasped. One of the new servers dropped an entire steak display tray.

The server in black snapped his fingers.

Everything shattered.

Ceramic. Steel. Ivory-handled cutlery. Glass. Bone china. Clouds of fragments lifted into the air like a reversed explosion, spinning into a constellation of glinting edges and silver dust.

And then—

The room began to break.

Tiles dissolved beneath their feet. Fixtures vanished. Walls dropped away. The booths and bar melted into vapor, revealing only the blacktop beneath—the parking lot outside, exposed under the night sky.

Only the tables remained. The people. The surrounding skyline. And a dome of pale light shielding the staff behind him.

Above them, the fragments spun faster, their motion tightening into a storm—until they converged into a massive, floating core. Not a single thing but a swollen cluster of obsidian blades, fused and writhing in midair like a heart made of spikes.

It pulsed once.

Then again.

Like it was breathing.

Like it was listening.

Far above, three massive blimps traced concentric rings in the sky—one low, one higher, one near-orbital. None of them paused. Through the gauzy dark between the blimps, a gleaming glidevein arched across the heavens—lit from the liquid within, full of motion, like a river rethreading the stars.

Jim the GM took a single step forward, hands raised. "Listen—whatever this is—don't do it. Please. I don't know what the hell this is, but don't—"

He didn't answer.

He just whispered a word.

A single syllable—soft, foreign, weightless as fog. And yet it landed like a verdict.

A ripple of light burst outward from his chest—low and shimmering, horizontal like a dropped stone in water. It spread in a perfect arc, forming a translucent veil that stretched across the broken lot.

It passed over all the people who worked at the restaurant.

Cooks. Servers. Bussers. Hosts.

Even the squatting expo manager mid-wipe.

Even the team members he didn't particularly like.

He covered them all.

Because he believed in the motto.

One Family. One Focus.

Of course, they weren't his real family.

His real family was... something else.

Something best left unnamed.

But aside from the old guy, they were his first human family.

And though he had to let them go now, he would not let them bleed.

The core above twitched—then bled.

Shapes began to fall, slow at first, then in clusters: long, gleaming shards of obsidian detaching from the core and raining in silence, cold as night, sharp as judgment.

Not all were true spikes. Some he shaped like the spetum—the polearm the old man had once described in passing, alongside dozens of others. For some reason, it was the one his younger mind had clung to. Maybe it was the duality of it, the way one end could pierce while the crescent could slice. Maybe it was its adaptability, its quiet efficiency. Whatever the reason, it was the shape he favored in moments like this—detached from its shaft, reshaped and honed to a killing edge.

Those were the ones he turned downward like spears. Others, he flipped—crescent forward, the sharpened curve slashing as they fell.

They struck Table 41 first.

The steak frites man took the first—straight through the shoulder, pinning him to the asphalt like an insect to cork. The next pierced his thigh. Then his hand. Each blow precise. Surgical.

The woman beside him shrieked as a crescent blade swept through her torso, clean as scissors through silk.

The other two tried to shield themselves, flinched, ducked.

None of it mattered.

They were carved down like meat.

One begged.

The other sobbed.

An unrelated person crumpled beneath a chair, spine sliced, mouth still moving.

And in the last moment before collective boiling point, he looked out at the flat, empty expanse of parking lot, strip mall, silence—it was a slice of irregularity.

As was he.

And right now, he was thankful for both.

Less density.

Less collateral.

The thought caught him off guard. He blinked, almost smiled. A strange kind of gratitude for broken things.

And then—things boiled over.

People scattered.

Somewhere close, the first full-body scream hit like a cue—and the crowd broke apart. Customers from surrounding tables shoved past each other, chairs clattering, shoes skidding across concrete as they bolted for the far end of the lot. One woman scooped up her toddler and sprinted. A couple leapt into a waiting SUV.

Keys fumbled in ignitions. Doors slammed. Engines roared to life.

Farther out—beyond the restaurants lot, across distance—shoppers froze outside the strip mall. They turned toward the noise. Saw the sky bleeding blades.

One man dropped his coffee. One teen took out their phone. Two people ran. Then six. Then twenty.

The entire area turned into a stampede.

But it was already too late.

The core above Table 41 ruptured—bursting outward into a starburst of smaller cores, each one orbiting on its own deadly axis. And the spike rain widened.

Not all were the simple, straight kind. Many split in mid-fall, their bodies bending into the hooked crescent of the spetum's blade. They spun as they dropped—points driving clean through bone, crescents carving out whatever the point missed. One punched through a roof and ripped sideways, peeling the

structure like fruit skin. Another speared a windshield, then scythed through the driver's throat as it curved.

The blades fell fast and straight and endless. They tore through rooftops. Sliced across windshields. Punched through hoods and rear views. Split tires. Split doors. Split glass.

A car burst into flame as a spike cleaved the engine block. Another crashed into a tree as the driver died mid-turn. Bodies fell across the sidewalk in twitching silhouettes.

It didn't matter how fast they ran. How loud they screamed. How raw their pleading became.

Every one of them was marked.

They could no more flee those falling shapes than he could dam the flood of euphoria rising as he finally—blissfully—let it all go.

The noise dulled first—screams, pleas, and the wet percussion of impact muffled like sound underwater. Motion blurred at the edges. He stopped counting how many he sent down, stopped tracking which fell as straight spikes and which curved into the split crescent of the spetum—the shape his hands always favored when he stopped thinking and simply acted. Some rained point-first, precise for piercing. Others fell inverted, the sharpened crescent slicing through anything it touched.

At the center, wrapped in a thin, shimmering veil that stilled even the air around them, stood his coworkers. Zaya's tears clung to her lashes, unable to fall. A cook's hand hovered mid-turn.

They were safe.

Because he had made a promise.

One Family. One Focus.

Corporate fluff on aprons and handbooks. But here, it meant something. Back home, focus had been the problem. He'd held too tight, wanted too much—and in doing so, ignored the one person who never let small things go. What he'd done there wasn't small. Here, at least, he was trying.

The heat began to ebb—not vanish, just retreat—like tide pulling back from a beach littered in ruin. When his awareness widened, it wasn't just the lot.

Glidevein transit lines hung split open, the severed tubes dumping their pressurized water into the sky in a silver torrent—great sheeting waterfalls that fell through broken rooftops and drowned streets below. Farther out, an office tower had been pierced clean through, one spetum spike punching out the

opposite wall in a shower of glass and steel. Another skyscraper leaned at a sickening angle, its upper floors nearly sheared away.

Some constructs still hung in the air, rotating slow, dripping molten light. Others had buried themselves deep into buildings, splitting them like firewood. Fires roared in the gaps, plumes merging into a single black canopy. Cars smoldered. Sirens wailed under the crackle of steel. Streets vanished beneath rubble.

Smoke curled where the restaurant had been.

Flaming cars sputtered.

People twitched.

A woman's hand—red to the wrist—clawed concrete once, then stilled.

The skyline was a silhouette of wounds.

All his.

He had overdone it.

He closed his eyes. Exhaled.

"Yeah," he rasped. "Clearly I quit."

Then—he whispered a word, snapped.

The city inhaled in reverse. Ash streamed upward, knitting bodies from bone to breath. Blood threaded back into veins. Screams folded into silence, rewound into gasps. Glass swam into frames. Towers righted themselves. Crushed skyscrapers lifted from the streets they'd flattened.

Distant waterfalls arced into overhead translucent transit tubes, sealing shut and humming with pressure.

Fires unburned. Smoke unraveled. Roads cleared. Cars reformed.

Spetum spikes unwound into vapor and vanished.

And just like that—

The city and the restaurant were whole again.

Table 41 sat intact. Alive. Perfect.

But every eye was wide. Every breath, shallow.

They all remembered.

He stepped forward, slow, level.

The steak frites man flinched, cried, pissed himself.

"That was your third steak frites," he said.

"Third time it was perfect."

RED TO THE WRIST

The man's mouth opened. No sound.

"I won't have the restraint to rewind it next time."

A warning.

A promise.

Another snap—

And the server in black was gone.

They forgot. Him. The destruction.

All of it. All of them.

The city blinked. The restaurant blinked.

A hostess seated a new couple.

A toddler laughed at the chaos they'd made with a ramekin of ketchup, tiny hands red to the wrist.

A server slipped out back to get high enough to swallow their pride.

A man gulped sweet tea like oxygen.

A woman who looked thirty but was seventy left with a young businessman.

People confessed. Lied. Laughed.

Failed beautifully.

Broke bread.

At Table 41, a man cut into a steak.

Pink. Medium.

He took a bite, raised his eyes, let the flavor settle on his tongue—

And, for reasons he could not name, felt grateful.

It was perfect.



That night, he packed.
Just a long structured black leather bag.
No magic required.
He could've stayed.

No one remembered. No one ever did.

The plates had reassembled. The bodies unbled. The screams reversed like tape.

But that wasn't how it worked.

Not for him.

When he lost control like that—

He *had* to leave.

Always.

Due to what it left.

So, he caught a midnight glidevein to a city he'd never been to. The pod was near-empty, its cabin glowing dimly beneath the ripple-light of the water rushing overhead. He sat without sleeping, watching the dark shapes of fish drift past the window like thoughts he couldn't hold.

Rented a room in a skyscraper by the week.

Walked the edge of the river at dawn, where the mist curled off the water like breath, and the birds began to wake—first in pairs, then in flocks, lifting off in synchronized arcs that cut black silhouettes against the watercolor sky.

A new city.

A new name.

Hopefully a new family.

A new focus.

That morning, the breeze carried something floral—half perfume, half memory. Sweet and spiced, almost like something he'd once craved.

Once loved.

Behind him, faint laughter echoed—running footsteps, a couple maybe, or a family setting out early for a day of activities. The whole world felt gently in motion.

He looked down at his hands.

No tremble. No glow. Just hands.

Human hands.

RED TO THE WRIST

He closed them into fists, opened them again, then sighed and took it all in.

This *could* be a life.

This *could* be his.

He just needed to try harder.

"No magic," he said aloud.

Then he thought of who he was.

Of what people could be.

Of how euphoric it felt to be rageful and righteous.

And smiled—a small, mischievous thing.

"Unless I *have* to."