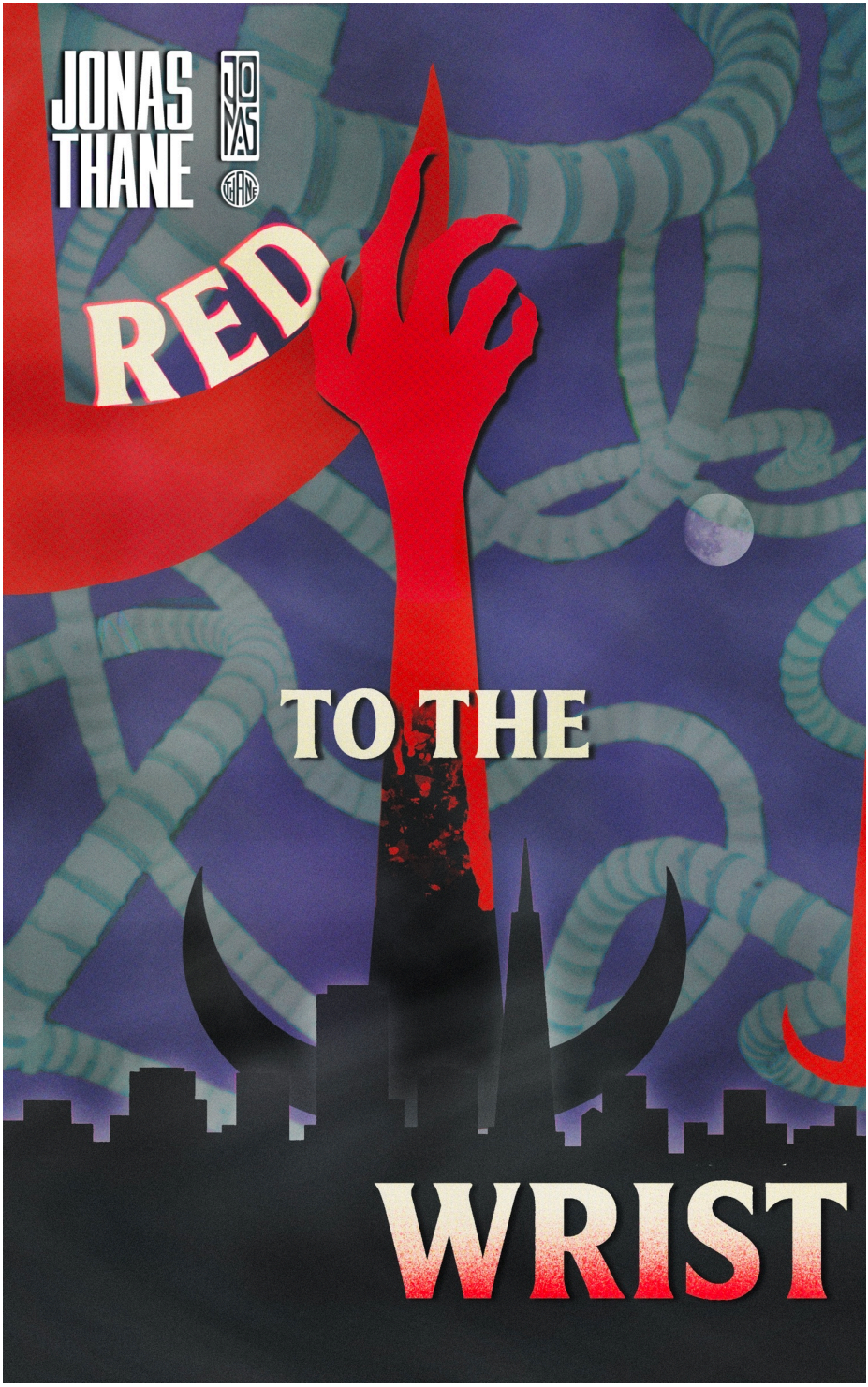
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RED TO THE WRIST

A Story
by Jonas Thane

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PREFACE

I used to skip prefaces.

Dedications.

Acknowledgments.

Anything before Chapter One.

I came for the story.

Truth is, I wasn't reading to understand.

I was reading to escape.

A lot of us are.

There's nothing wrong with that.

But somewhere along the way, I noticed the things I'd been running from weren't as frightening anymore. Maybe they shrank. Maybe I grew. Probably both.

I started reading differently.

Not just to escape a life.

To understand one.

That's when those pages before Chapter One stopped feeling like filler. They became maps. Not to the story, but to the person who felt compelled to tell it.

So here's my map.

I grew up believing there was a right way to build a life.

School.

Degrees.

Jobs.

Burnout.

Eventually I reached a crossroads: continue becoming someone I didn't recognize, or begin becoming someone I did.

I chose stories.

Most of what I write lives somewhere between science fantasy, urban surrealism, memory, and metaphor. They're stories about people trying to become themselves, even when the world insists otherwise.

This one is no different.

I hope you find something in these pages worth carrying with you.

A question.

A sentence.

A flicker of beauty.

Or simply the feeling that, for a little while, you weren't alone.

RED TO THE WRIST

Before the screaming started in the back, the server in black was moving.

Three plates balanced along one arm.

Heat hung thick enough to wear.

Demi-glace lingered in the air, rich and earthy, settling into his clothes before the shift was half over

Sweat gathered at his brow, the shine of hours spent on his feet during a dinner rush.

He nudged the double doors open with his heel and stepped into the narrow corridor connecting front of house to back.

The phrase had bothered him the first time he'd heard it.

A house?

Not here.

Not in a country stitched together from cities, where towers climbed until they disappeared into haze and every new skyline simply became the foundation for the next.

Detached homes belonged to history.

Private yards belonged to the ultra-rich...

...or to the sprawling Zones of Corporate Interest, where corporations owned more land than some nations and built neighborhoods the way other companies built laboratories. Employees called them communities. Everyone else called them company towns.

Old Harry had taught him about houses.

The real kind.

With porches.

Backyards.

Fences.

Places where the ground belonged to the people standing on it.

He'd taught him about towers too.

About the cities that swallowed them.

About glideveins.

Wars.

Treaties.

Architecture.

The fault lines hidden inside maps.

He could name ancient weapons most people had never heard of because the strange old man insisted such things mattered.

Old Harry had taught him nearly everything.

And he was rarely wrong.

Which was why the phrase lingered.

Later he'd learned it came from theater.

The *house* had once meant the audience.

Restaurants inherited the language when service became performance and kitchens became stages.

Still...

Every time he heard front of house and back of house, some part of him pictured the impossible.

A patch of soil.

A fence.

A porch.

A home.

He dropped the plates into the dish bin and leaned against the stainless steel.

One breath.

Two.

A new server with copper curls stood near the to-go station, staring at the small screen in her hands. She glanced up. Looked surprised for a beat. Then back down.

His cheeks warmed.

Maybe she was texting.

Maybe she wasn't.

Maybe the post existed already.

The one he wouldn't want to read but wouldn't be able to stop himself from reading.

He looked away.

Gratitude.

That was the practice.

Like the twinge in his lower back that morning.

For fifteen minutes he'd convinced himself it was the beginning of something permanent.

A slipped disc.

Chronic pain.

The first stone in a landslide.

Instead it vanished before lunch.

Gratitude.

Most things passed.

Most things weren't permanent.

At least, that's what he told himself.

He pushed away from the counter and drifted through prep, dry storage, and the back hall before stepping into the walled trash pit where the smokers gathered.

The concrete enclosure boxed in the dumpsters and grease bins, shielding them from the parking lot beyond. Off to the left, a steel service door stood propped open, as it always was, revealing only a sliver of asphalt before the wall swallowed the rest.

The dishwasher, Emil, was already slipping through it with a cigarette in one hand and his phone pressed to his ear.

"...No, just listen to me for like two seconds, okay?"

He disappeared around the corner, his voice fading with him as he searched for the illusion of privacy.

The server in black didn't smoke.

But he'd come to love these stolen slices of stillness.

The air hit him warm and wrong.

Fryer grease floated on cigarette smoke. Sanitizer tried to civilize the smell of the dumpster, but rot always got the last word.

Someone had left the dumpster lid cracked again.

He breathed in anyway.

Immediately regretted it.

A laugh escaped him.

Near the wall, Talia, a broad-shouldered server with honey colored coils pulled into a high ponytail, leaned against the brick with a cigarette pinched between two chipped black nails.

Across from her stood Marco, one of the bartenders. Salt-and-pepper beard. Crooked nose. The kind of face that looked permanently disappointed until he smiled.

"You gonna take him back?" Marco asked.

Talia snorted smoke through her nose.

"He's saying he's changed."

Marco tilted his head.

"And? He says that every six months."

He shrugged.

"I used to give people the benefit of the doubt."

She raised an eyebrow.

"You don't anymore?"

"I think people change."

He took another drag.

A long pause.

"They just usually change into more of who they already were."

Neither of them looked at him.

Above the wall, a glidevein arced through the darkness. One pod whispered past. Then another. Water chased metal through something close to glass, their passing turning the tube into a vein of moving moonlight.

The sky had layers.

Lower veins threaded neighborhoods.

Higher routes stitched together districts and cities.

And far above them all, the main lines carried people across continents.

The last time he'd ridden one, he'd been coming here.

A new city.

A new pace.

A new place.

A new him.

Or so he'd hoped.

The light from the glideveins rippled across a rain puddle beside the dumpster before dissolving into shadow.

Beyond the wall, the parking lot stretched flat beneath towers that scraped the sky. A year ago, a relatively small breach had erased five city blocks. Buildings folded into themselves without warning, one after another, as if the ground had briefly forgotten how to hold them.

Not fire.

Not quake.

Just...

failure.

Recovery had been slow.

Scars always were.

His own reconstruction wasn't much different.

Slow.

Messy.

But real.

That was one of the things he loved about this city.

Every day asked something new of him.

A different rhythm.

A different mistake.

A different lesson.

Not grand revelations.

Small ones.

Like learning that breathing through your mouth beside a dumpster wasn't cowardice.

It was adaptation.

He'd known that for months.

Still, some lessons deserved repeating.

Especially the ones that kept you from becoming the person you used to be.

Back home, he'd thought he'd learned everything worth learning.

The arrogance of that thought almost made him laugh.

Now he wasn't so sure.

Every shift.

Every stranger.

Every conversation overheard.

Every ugly little inconvenience seemed determined to sand another sharp edge off him.

Or at least reveal one he hadn't noticed before.

"...Well maybe don't call me if you're gonna hang up every time I answer, then."

Emil.

Still arguing.

Still smoking.

Still figuring out love, apparently.

He smiled.

The brick at his back still held the day's warmth.

Another careful breath.

Dumpster air had taught him plenty.

Some lessons just needed refreshing.

Not every breath needed to be deep.

Somewhere beyond the wall, a horn blared.

Talia coughed.

Marco flicked ash onto the pavement.

The city kept teaching.

Another pod disappeared into the night.

The city kept moving.

He stood still.

Long enough for memory to catch up.

Standing there beneath the glow of the veins, with cigarette smoke and gnats drifting through the humid air, he found himself slipping backward again.

Back to the morning.

Back to the apartment.

Back to waking up late.

A year earlier, he'd seen the listing that morning.

Viewed it that afternoon.

Signed the lease before sunset.

By nightfall, he had keys.

Sometimes the world seemed eager to arrange itself around him.

He tried not to ask why.

He tried even harder not to help it along.

A year later, the apartment still felt halfway between arrival and departure.

Bare in the way a held breath was bare.

A couch salvaged from the curb.

Walls stripped except for a few thrifted mirrors.

No rugs.

Just scuffed hardwood.

And boxes.

Paintbrushes.

Fabric and thread beside an old sewing machine still waiting for repair.

Clay.

Candles.

Yarn.

Bands.

Yoga blocks.

Beads.

String.

A crate of books.

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 bag he'd rolled into town with, charms hanging from it that clinked softly when he moved.

Preparation in physical form.

The lesson learned too late.

You only learn the true shape of preparedness when you finally see what it might have saved.

Last night had ended later than planned.

An unplanned double.

His fridge only had juice and condiments.

He didn't even have the energy to order delivery.

He'd gone to bed hungry.

Before sleep, he'd tossed his pants into the washer.

Forgotten the dryer.

All three pairs washed.

All three wet.

His brilliant plan had been to dry them while he showered.

Instead, exhaustion won. By the time he woke that morning, there wasn't time.

He wasn't the type to rush a shower.

So he'd settled for the sink-and-towel routine.

Quick.

But decent.

Only then had he remembered the pants.

Which left him with the oldest pair.

The first-day pair.

A year ago, they fit.

Now they hugged his thighs and ass like they were holding a grudge.

The urge to swear rose sharp in his chest.

Three in.

Four out.

Not worth it.

Not worth starting the day lit like a fuse.

He dressed anyway.

Slung the bag over his shoulder.

Set out.

Normally, he walked.

But he'd been late.

So he'd aimed for the glidevein.

Down for unspecified maintenance.

Of course.

His teeth had met.

He'd wanted to call it sabotage.

Incompetence.

Anything.

Instead, he'd focused on the bag slung across his shoulder.

Long enough to brush the backs of his knees.

Big enough that strangers instinctively stepped aside when they saw him coming.

Its little metal charms chimed softly against the leather, announcing him a heartbeat before he arrived.

People asked about it all the time.

"What do you keep in there?"

He never answered honestly.

For something so cavernous, it rode surprisingly light.

At least for him.

The steady tap of its charms matched his footsteps.

Something predictable.

Something to follow.

The only detour would've sent him halfway across the city.

So he'd walked.

Towers.

Sirens.

Steam.

Ten thousand voices moving in ten thousand rhythms.

Bikes slicing gaps.

Glideveins pulsing through tubes overhead.

Vehicles drifting through the grid.

Ten minutes.

Caution tape.

Route blocked.

Spill?

Leak?

Wreck?

No one said.

He took a breath.

Found an alley mural.

Gold paint on crumbling red brick.

A woman's face dissolving into birds.

Three extra blocks.

Shop windows.

Streets he half-knew.

The details you only noticed when you were already late.

And trying not to burn over it.

An emergency response rig idled half a block ahead, its crew leaning against the vehicle with coffees in hand, waiting on whatever call had brought them there.

Then she appeared.

Across the street.

Dark curls spilling over one shoulder, a sunflower-yellow blouse bright enough to win against the gray city.

Beautiful enough to slow him mid-stride.

A glance.

Held.

Vehicles blurred between them.

He never saw the pile of shit.

His shoe slid.

Legs split.

A pull in his back.

A ripping sound.

Not torn.

Just stretched.

Thankfully.

Her mouth curled.

A laugh.

Heat climbed his neck.

He fixed his shoe.

Tucked his shirt.

Pulled his cuffs down.

Then bent.

The loosened seam gave way.

Loud.

Final.

Normally, not a disaster.

Normally, there'd be underwear.

But he'd always thought underwear redundant.

That's what pants were for.

So they ripped.

Breeze.

Dangle.

A couple behind him gasped.

The woman clutched her chest in theatrical horror.

Someone shouted,

"Gahhhhhd damn!"

Another screamed like death itself had arrived.

The responders were already running before anyone thought to call.

Tires shrieked.

Metal crumpled.

He ducked into an alley with his bag.

Less than a minute later, he emerged.

His stride hadn't changed.

Neither had the bag.

Only the tear was gone.

Red and green lights washed across the brick as the medical crew worked around the collapsed woman.

A responder's voice carried through the noise.

"All right, we gotta call it. Time of..."

The rest vanished behind the pounding of his own feet.

The husband screaming.

The sobbing.

The spectacle.

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 hear the comments.

How does he sit down?

My guy's got a winter pelt.

Who gave him clearance for those?

The hashtags practically wrote themselves.

#FreeThemBoys

#SwingLowButNotThatLow

#DumperDiplomacy

#GreatGooglyMoogly

Someone would stitch it to a trending song and turn humiliation into a loop.

Others would swear his ass deserved its own verification mark.

He tried not to think about things he couldn't control.

So he ran.

Not because fifteen minutes mattered. Not really.

Restaurants had their own relationship with time. Fifteen minutes could be nothing. Or it could become everything.

Maybe a closer forgot silverware the night before.

Maybe a server called out.

Maybe the chef showed up hungover.

Maybe the manager got trapped in a phone call.

Maybe the ice machine picked today to die.

Maybe nothing happened at all.

You never knew until you walked through those doors.

That was the problem.

Fifteen quiet minutes before opening could mean catching up.

Or simply breathing.

And if luck held, maybe no one would come in right at eleven anyway.

Most people didn't.

Breakfast crowds stayed with breakfast.

Lunch didn't really begin for another hour.

Sometimes you even got two.

Time to stock.

Reset.

Think.

Then, inevitably, right at opening time, the front door would open.

In would stroll a couple who looked thirty-five, held hands like newlyweds, and somehow still carried themselves with the

unmistakable confidence of people who'd been eating lunch at eleven for half a century.

Medicine could smooth a face.

Replace a knee.

Grow a liver.

Even persuade the mirror to lie.

Habit, though...

Habit survived almost everything.

He hated missing those quiet minutes.

Not because he fell behind.

Because he started behind.

So he ran.

The city thinned around him.

Not gradually.

Abruptly.

Tower after tower gave way to open sky.

Five city blocks of absence.

The breach had happened over a year ago.

Buildings had folded into themselves with a precision nobody could explain.

Investigations came.

Committees followed.

Developers circled.

Insurance fought everyone.

And so the wound remained.

An ocean of cracked asphalt where another forest of towers had stood.

The steakhouse survived mostly because it had never been meant to stay.

It was temporary.

A placeholder built over the foundation of a future tower.

When everything around it collapsed, the little building simply... didn't.

Now it sat almost alone at the edge of the scar, the strip mall across the lot and a handful of other stubborn survivors keeping it company.

He crossed the empty expanse at a sprint.

Rounded the building.

Slowed only long enough to reach the employee entrance tucked inside the concrete trash enclosure.

The doorbell buzzed beneath his thumb.

A click.

One of the chefs inside released the lock.

He slipped through.

Past the chef's office wedged beneath the stairs, little more than a desk pretending to be a room.

Past dry storage.

Past the walk-in cooler.

Past the beer cooler and wine room.

Past the humming freezers.

The dish pit.

The to-go station.

He paused before the double doors.

Around him, the back of house folded into organized chaos. Tray jacks leaned against the wall. Stacks of serving trays. Shelves crowded with sanitizer, spare glass racks, paper goods, and the thousand little things a dining room needed without ever noticing. The beer cooler hummed.

The walk-in breathed somewhere deeper in the building.

The leather strap slipped from his shoulder.

The charms gave their familiar little chime.

He straightened his tie.

Smoothed his apron.

Then stepped through the doors into the dining room.

As always, he left the bag behind.

No one had ever seen where.

Only then did he push through the doors.

The dining room stopped him cold.

Every table had been naked.

No black undercloths.

No white toppers.

No folded napkins.

No forks.

No wineglasses.

Nothing.

His stomach dropped.

Find something steady.

His eyes found a seam in the carpet, perfectly parallel to the bar rail.

An imperfection to distract from life's own.

He knew what this meant.

GuestGuard.

Officially: impact-absorbing, structure-preserving, liability-proof.

Unofficially: the same polymer sold to schools under another name.

After the litigation years, it was everywhere.

Restaurants stripped every table before close now, glassware stacked in designated safe zones, silverware locked away in padded bins.

He'd worked the double yesterday.

Left before closing.

Missed the briefing.

Missed the entire operation.

The flare of rage returned, chewing quietly at his ribs.

His hand twitched toward the nearest chair.

Instead:

Breath.

Five things the same color.

One.

The black edge of the host stand.

Two.

The matte legs of the nearest two-top.

Three.

The U-shaped marble bar.

Four.

The exposed rafters overhead.

Five.

Him.

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.

Old Harry hadn't just taught him history.

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."

A rhyme.

A lesson.

A lifeline.

And he'd needed all three.

Because this morning, everything had landed on him.

Putting back together what had already been torn apart.

Misery loves company, Harry used to say.

But irony?

Irony throws a banquet.

The opening server, Chloe, was late.

Again.

There was always a reason.

Flat tire.

Missed pod.

Sick dog.

Locked out.

Every excuse sounded believable because most of them probably were.

The hostess had called an hour earlier.

Car wreck the night before.

Nothing life-threatening.

Just enough to keep her home.

Jim was already buried in inventory, invoices, and three separate vendor calls because the assistant manager had taken emergency leave.

Which meant the dining room belonged to him.

Just him.

Black undercloths.

White toppers.

Eight forks.

Four butter knives.

Four folded napkins.

Four wineglasses.

Four water glasses.

Every four-top.

Every two-top.

Plus the bar.

Forty-five minutes.

Hundreds of pieces.

Thousands of tiny decisions.

He moved table to table alone, laying silverware with one hand while straightening chairs with the other, already sweating before a single guest had walked through the doors.

The restaurant wasn't asking him to fail.

It had simply removed every person who would've made success possible.

So far there'd been a dozen moments that day when the old him would've lost it.

But not yet.

He was trying to lay new beams inside himself.

Because the frame of the life he'd been meant to have was already ash.

Another pod hissed overhead.

Emil was crying somewhere beyond the wall.

The smokers had gone quiet.

He realized he'd been staring at nothing.

Remembering.

Holding still.

One last breath.

Then he said goodbye to stillness and headed back inside.

Past the chef's office crouched beneath the stairs.

Past prep and dry storage.

Until the noise found him again.

Near the dish pit, barrel-chested Rasnim, hawk-nosed Bharlie, and bright-eyed Yaya huddled around a device.

The screen stuttered, but the anchor's 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..."

Then:

"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.

Yaya leaned closer. "Turn it up."

Static.

Then:

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

They weren't watching anymore.

They were waiting.

Hoping someone would ask.

Hoping to be first with the answer.

He didn't bite.

Didn't even look.

Then the screaming started.

The double doors burst open hard enough to rattle the push plates.

A stocky server named Tolan, cheeks already flushed beneath his beard, stormed into the kitchen.

"You stole my fucking table!"

Right behind him came Suri, tall and wiry, her dark braid whipping behind her.

"I didn't steal shit! You clocked in twenty minutes late!"

"Table 32 was mine. They specifically requested me!"

"You. Were. Late! They'd already ordered!"

"The drinks don't count!"

"The drinks always count!"

They were nearly nose to nose now.

A walk-in ten-top.

One had greeted them.

The other had been scheduled to serve them.

Territory.

Ego.

Ten-top tips.

Standard shit.

The kitchen slowed.

Not stopped.

Just...slowed.

Rasnim lowered the device.

Bharlie sighed through his nose.

Yaya rubbed a hand across his forehead before stepping between them.

"Enough," he said. "Manager. Now."

Neither listened.

Their voices climbed higher, sharp enough to etch glass.

The server in black watched without moving.

He'd noticed something over the years.

Anger always arrived loudest in tight spaces.

Heat.

Noise.

Bodies packed together.

Pressure looking for somewhere to escape, hissing from people the way steam escaped a cracked pipe.

Still, screaming had never made sense to him.

It felt inefficient.

If you're going to be angry...

Be angry.

Don't bark over scraps and call it justice.

Do something.

Change something.

Or don't.

Maybe yelling was safer.

Maybe it bled the pressure off before it became something else.

Because when he got angry...

Things didn't escalate.

They ended.

And that was the question he kept circling.

Are endings always bad?

Is anger meant to flare and fade?

Or soothe whatever festers underneath?

He used to think anger made him strong.

Now he wondered if it only revealed the shape of a person.

The cracks.

The pressure points.

The truths they hid from themselves.

Eventually Jim the GM arrived.

Voices dropped.

The shouting died.

The kitchen didn't.

It never did.

The broiler roared.

Pans hissed as steaks met steel.

Tickets tore from printers in impatient bursts.

Someone shouted for *hands*.

Someone else shouted back.

Non-slip shoes chirped across wet tile while plates clinked, glasses knocked together, and the ventilation fought a losing battle against smoke, butter, and char.

Near the line, freckled Meli restocked ramekins with machine-like precision.

At beverage, broad-shouldered Pana stirred sweet tea by hand because the dispenser had broken three months ago and nobody ever ordered a replacement.

At the triple sink, silver-streaked Larisol worked through an endless mountain of dishes, half-singing, half-drowning herself in rhythm beneath the hiss of the sprayer.

It was loud.

Hot.

Alive.

He wiped the sweat from his brow with the inside of his forearm.

Straightened his spine.

Adjusted his collar.

Then pushed through the double doors.

The noise changed.

Not quieter.

Different.

The sharp percussion of the kitchen gave way to polished conversation, restrained laughter, silver against porcelain, the low swell of music tucked beneath it all.

To his left, candlelight flickered through the glass of the semi-private room.

To his right, the private suite murmured with expensive voices and practiced discretion.

He kept moving.

Past the dining room, where Table 50 already felt like a problem.

Past the glowing POS screens.

Into the bar.

An espresso martini waited at the well, its foam just beginning to settle.

Tonight, he was determined to be on top form.

Hair perfect.

Sleeves rolled.

Apron spotless.

Smile tuned.

Jokes light.

By seven-thirty, the steakhouse had found its rhythm.

Bone-in ribeyes sizzling on cast iron.

Wine dark as blood.

Oak and brass gleaming beneath amber lights.

Nine hours into a double.

Bartender by day.

Server by night.

A year ago, he'd only needed a paycheck and somewhere to disappear.

Now...

He was growing.

It was the longest he'd stayed anywhere in years.

He called it a fresh start.

New city.

Clean slate.

Not a lie.

Just not the whole truth.

He'd arrived with a name, his leather bag, a couple changes of clothes, a handful of mementos, and memories he kept trying to convince himself weren't real.

And one quiet promise.

No more mistakes.

No more damage.

No more outbursts.

He meant it.

Mostly.

Sometimes his mind drifted home.

To the hush of stone halls.

The smell of ink and old leather.

Rooms lined with books and expectation.

He'd studied there for years.

Not just for knowledge.

For inheritance.

Like scripture.

Like prayer.

Like incantation.

And still...

It hadn't been enough.

Memory didn't mend what he'd broken.

Didn't bring the place closer.

Didn't make him welcome again.

So he let it pass.

At least until memory found him first.

"You look like you're glowing tonight."

The voice belonged to a silver-haired woman with pearl earrings and impossible skin, her manicured fingers brushing his forearm as he approached Table 12.

She always ate alone.

Always flirted.

Always tipped well.

Seventy-something, technically.

She didn't look a day over thirty.

Smooth face.

Sharp jaw.

Perfect posture.

Desire without apology.

Age had become a detail here.

Not a feature.

At least for those who could afford it.

Everyone else wore time until time wore them away.

He smiled.

"You know I sweat when I sparkle."

He slid her second espresso martini into place without breaking stride, lifted away the empty glass, and continued moving.

Table 12 sat in the lounge, technically outside his section, but he'd picked it up earlier after the lunch server asked him to cover a couple lingering tables.

A gentle overlap had become a squeeze.

Five tables at once.

Three turned.

Two stayed.

He was resetting Table 17 when the host stand caught his eye.

A tall, curvy blonde woman stood framed in the glass doors, sunlight catching the faint silver metallic filigree winding like vines down her throat and arms.

Ornamental to most.

Diagnostic to anyone who knew better.

Old Harry had taught him that, too.

Hormistress.

Chemisiren.

Glandmother.

Heat Leech.

Alpha Doe.

MK-Mary.

Depends on who was talking and how much they'd suffered.

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. Firm.

The woman's mouth tightened, 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 there was probably a uniform nearby.

Maybe outside.

Maybe down the block.

Ready to escort her away if she lingered.

She turned.

For a moment, her reflection caught his in the glass.

Then she was gone.

Back home, he might've stepped in.

Back home, he'd acted often and without hesitation.

Doing things because he could, never asking if he should. Never wondering if the change would last after he left.

Here, he reminded himself, he was only trying to experience life beyond home.

Beautiful and ugly both.

He still wondered how much responsibility came with knowing you could do something.

Whether being able meant you had to.

He wasn't sure anymore.

What he was sure of was his section.

Center floor.

Five tables.

Three already full.

And he was floating.

Moving like water.

Steps precise.

Pace measured.

Order in.

Waters down.

Salads out.

Entrées 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 got busy, time bent.

An hour became five.

A double could dissappear.

He liked that.

The puzzle.

The balance.

The satisfaction of a table leaving happy without needing a thing.

But more than that, he liked the moments no one talked about.

Whenever he had a stack of dishes for the pit, he'd almost always take the long way back.

Not enough for anyone to notice.

Just enough to drift.

Past another booth.

Another table.

Another life.

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

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

He rounded the lounge.

"...We have the numbers," said a sharp-suited exec with glossy black nails, "and it's a symphony. Nobody's gonna expect..."

Past the patio entrance.

"...If you don't figure out a way to handle your... issue," warned a tired woman in a utility vest, "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..."

He slipped between two four-tops.

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

Near the bar.

"...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..."

He cleared an empty bread basket without breaking stride.

"...When I tell you that man put me *through* the mattress," wheezed a woman with a nasal cackle, before breaking into a purr.

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

He slipped past another server.

"...If she did that to me?" drawled a man with a gold tooth. "That bitch would be in a blimp right now."

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

"...Who the fuck chooses the Extere Zone?" grunted a red-faced bald man with steak sauce on his tie. "Hippies, heat leeches, and dirtbags. Good riddance."

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

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

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

He never got the full stories.

Only fragments.

The trailing edge of someone's life as he passed by.

Broken poetry.

Half-finished confessions.

Joy.

Regret.

And somewhere between the dining room and the dish pit, his mind always did what minds do.

It filled in the rest.

Dog.

Divorce.

Corporate fraud.

Open marriage.

Second thoughts.

Impulse disguised as romance.

The best night of someone's life.

The worst week of someone else's.

Organized crime.

A conversation that should've happened at home.

A man lying to himself.

A doctor in love with a coworker.

A father learning that children eventually become people.

Probably.

Maybe.

None of it could've been true.

All of it could've been.

That was the magic of fragments.

They arrived as facts.

They left as stories.

There was a kind of magic in it.

People in the messy middle.

Trying.

Pretending.

Failing beautifully.

Breaking bread all the while.

That was a secret real pleasure of the job.

The glimpses.

The overheard truths.

The soft places people didn't mean to show.

He could be both 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 bury the old feelings.

Made him feel like less of what he'd been.

More of what he wanted to be.

But that wasn't the full truth.

When he first arrived here, he hated it.

All of it.

The climate. The scale. The noise.

The way people talked.

The way they didn't.

Everything felt loud and cold and shameless and too bright at night.

Even the sky looked artificial, crossed by glass arteries pulsing with seawater and glinting like veins beneath fluorescent skin.

But still, miracles happened here.

The quiet kind.

Years ago, Old Harry, kind and wise and crass, had squatted down until they were eye level and said,

"You wanna survive? Find one beautiful thing a day. Don't wait for it. Make it. Flower punching through sidewalk. Skyline catching light just right. 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.

But he'd started looking anyway.

First out of desperation.

Then habit.

Now?

Belief.

The beautiful things changed.

Sometimes a rhythm.

Sometimes grace in the noise.

Sometimes a stranger's conversation that made the world feel good again.

If only for a second.

He let the thought 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 better people thought *he* was better dead.

He shook that off too.

His legs ached.

Hunger gnawed beneath his ribs.

He hadn't peed in hours.

And the his next table was just arriving.

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.

One of *those* tables.

You could always tell.

He took a deep breath.

Exhaled.

He approached with measured pace, already scanning.

Both couples sat side by side. Men on the outside. Women trapped between wall and husband.

The men faced each other, heads tilted close, one speaking low and fast, the other nodding like he was winning a bet.

The women giggled behind manicured fingers, eyes already glossy from the first few rounds elsewhere.

He noticed the details without looking like he noticed anything.

Designer coats.

Expensive watches that didn't need to announce themselves.

Laughs half a second too early and a touch too loud.

Words like *fund* and *renovation* drifting above the table.

He knew the type.

Close enough to enter their periphery.

Not close enough to intrude.

He hovered just long enough.

Four heads turned.

That was the opening.

"Good evening, welcome in. My name's—"

A raised finger.

The taller man didn't even look at him.

Just paused him like a playlist.

Conversation continued another beat.

A nearby wineglass answered with the faintest crystalline note.

ting.

Nobody looked up.

Someone behind him laughed too loud.

Then, with surgical precision:

"Two Diet Tavis. Four waters. No ice. Six lemons. One lime. Four straws."

He nodded once.

"Of course."

As he turned toward the bar, the note was already gone.

He nodded once.

"Of course. I'll grab those while you look over the menus."

"We already know," said the second man, eyes still down. "We're not here to chat."

He nodded again.

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."

The order came fast.

Practiced.

Like reading inventory.

He waited.

Repeated it back.

Then gently:

"And for the Caesars, would either of you be interested in our tableside preparation? It's made fresh table side and inclu—"

"No," one of the women cut in.

Not rude.

Not quite.

Just brisk.

Sharp with decision.

"And a side of asparagus."

He felt the familiar heat bloom behind his ribs.

A spoon resting beside the bread plate quivered once.

Or maybe his eyes did.

He blinked.

It was still.

The second woman never acknowledged him.

Her eyes slid past him.

Past his face.

Past his voice.

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

He rang everything in without mistake.

And twenty minutes later, when the food came out 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 insisted it was medium.

They were wrong. The color was textbook. But they pressed their knives into the meat with slow, theatrical disappointment.

Then came the salads.

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

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

He offered to have the salad chef chop them.

They waved him off.

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

He offered to leave the originals while the kitchen refired.

They refused.

"If it's gonna be a few minutes," she shrugged, "we'd rather start over."

"And another loaf of bread," one added absently.

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

Deep breath in.

One of the pendant lights above the table gave a slow, lazy sway.

Then another.

Not enough to spill a drink.

Just enough for the glasses to catch the light differently.

The taller man glanced toward the ceiling.

“Another micro-breach?” he asked.

His wife looked up, shrugged.

“Probably somewhere across the city.”

“We’ll hear about it tonight.”

The lights settled.

Conversation returned to the steaks.

No one thought about it again.

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.

Deep breath out.

Smile.

Nod.

Two trips to clear the table.

Steaks. Salads. Asparagus. Empty bread plate.

Untouched.

Half-picked.

Not a bite finished.

He carted it all back like failure.

First offense of the night.

Still early.

Still salvageable.

He smiled the whole way.

But inside, something leaned sideways.

And if it'd just been that table, maybe the night would've held together.

But it wasn't.

It was everything else.

The things guests never saw.

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 hope filled lie.

Then another table asked.

He called for bread three times in ten minutes between clearing plates, dropping checks, running drinks, ferrying desserts.

Nothing.

As he passed the service station, the stack of bread plates gave a faint chatter against itself.

Just once.

A soft porcelain

tk-tk.

One of the food runners frowned at the stack.

"You feel that?"

Another shrugged without looking up.

"Probably another breach somewhere."

“Hope it’s not close.”

The plates went still.

“So do I,” he muttered, already moving.

Eventually, you stop explaining.

Stop apologizing.

You just carry the silence like it’s yours, even when it isn’t.

Technically, bread belonged to service support.

But support tonight was a constellation of duds.

The expo manager with IBS was trapped in the bathroom.

The GM, who should’ve been floating and smiling, was sweating through his button-down and barking into the kitchen like it was war.

Every clipped word a lit fuse.

Of the five support staff, one was slicing parsley like sacred scripture.

Two were locked in a silverware trance.

The other two had vanished.

Probably out back optimizing 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.

“Speed up,” management said.

So he did.

Hotter.

Faster.

Spec be damned.

The bourbon on the chefs breath explained enough.

His wife had left last month.

A man has to cope.

So they let him burn.

Well done and melting down.

And then there was Zaya.

Fellow server.

Sharp.

Stunning.

She didn't need the job.

She'd said as much.

She worked for the rhythm.

The flow.

He understood.

In a way, so did he.

They'd had easy conversations before shifts.

Past loves.

Clean breaks.

Simple things.

And she'd made herself clear.

She only wanted something physical.

An invitation.

He just hadn't figured out how to say no without sounding stupid.

It wasn't religion.

Not purity.

He just wanted his first time to mean something.

Not a shrug.

Not a scratch.

Not a crash pad.

So tonight he stayed in motion.

If she was at the beverage station, he rerouted.

If she went west, he went east.

Fake errands.

Long paths.

Opposite poles refusing contact.

Because she wasn't the type to leave things unsaid.

And if they got stuck alone, even for a second, she'd ask.

Not cruelly.

Just honestly.

And he wasn't ready for honesty.

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 decide how much a dream was worth once reality walked in.

And all the while, the night pressed closer.

The air didn't help.

Guests probably felt a little warm.

Servers felt war.

The AC wasn't broken.

Just weak.

Bodies.

Burners.

Bad moods.

He was dripping.

Shirt clinging.

Apron damp.

Napkins stuffed into his pockets like gauze.

The dish pit was a swamp.

Steam.

Grease.

Heat.

Noise.

Bussing his own tables meant endless trips to the back, where backups became elbow-to-elbow chaos over a dirty plate.

The air thick with sanitizer, fryer oil, and fatigue.

Voices too loud.

Or too quiet.

Fake laughs.

Crying in corners.

Two servers pretending they weren't fighting.

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 overlapped now.

Drinks with apps.

Entrées with desserts.

Checks with refills.

Everything at once.At least the cocktail tables had left before the rush.

Starting with them hadn't helped.

Table 40 was on their fourth round of sweet tea, the husband drinking like legislation was pending. Loud slurps carrying three tables over.

Table 50 had kids.

Sticky fingers.

Ketchup emergencies.

Ranch crises.

More crayons.

More everything.

They were kids.

Table 51 flagged him down like someone was choking.

Nobody was.

They just wanted to know where the scallops and calamari came from.

They ran a seafood distribution business.

They were just wondering.

Table 33 wasn't even his.

Quince had caught him near the server station before disappearing out back.

"Hey man," he'd said, already halfway through the door. "Can you keep an eye on my one-top? Family thing. I'll be right back."

Easy enough.

One guest.

Almost finished.

Steak.

Sparkling water.

A book folded open beside the plate.

One earbud in.

The other resting on the table.

The kind of diner who looked perfectly content being left alone.

He'd topped off the man's water once.

Asked if he needed anything.

The man had smiled without looking up from the page.

"No, thank you. Everything's perfect."

That was it.

Thirty seconds, maybe.

Just long enough to remember him.

Then there was Table 52.

They never should've been sat.

Policy was simple.

No partial parties.

But the hostess, one of only two scheduled, was all nerves and no logic.

Breaking rotations.

Double-seating.

Smiling sweetly while snapping the floor plan in half.

He'd tried to wave her off.

Too late.

Four arrived first.

Fifteen minutes later they gave up waiting on the others and ordered.

Halfway through salads, two more appeared.

Five minutes before entrées, the final three rolled in.

Laughing.

Sunburned.

Smelling of cologne and entitlement.

Now it was a nine-top.

Nine moods.

Nine drinks.

Nine expectations.

The late arrivals wanted appetizers.

Then soup.

Then time to decide.

No apology.

Just the easy confidence 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 great at disappearing after all.

So they didn't see the pressure building.

They asked questions they could've answered themselves. Not clarifications. Conversations.

He'd stop. Crouch.

Explain substitutions and prix fixe options.

They'd nod.

"Yeah, I'll probably do something else."

He'd turn.

"Oh wait, question about a drink."

Smile.

Answer.

Turn.

"So sorry. More bread? More refills?"

Nod.

Step away.

"Actually, another round of calamari and drinks. For everyone."

Sweetly asked.

Kindly meant.

None of it malicious.

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

Not from hatred.

Just that primitive urge to make the noise stop.

He imagined it like a fable for one.

Grabbing a head by the hair.

Slam.

Only for it to bounce off the GuestGuard-coated table.

Squeak.

Blink.

Confused.

"Whoa, bud. Everything okay?"

Another squeak.

Concern now.

"Listen, man, I waited tables in college. I get it."

Another voice.

A woman.

Syrupy and maternal.

"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 smashing two heads together like cymbals.

Squeak.

Squeak.

Squeak.

"Deep breaths, buddy."

"We're all friends here."

"Maybe take a few deep breaths."

The voices blurred into one long squeaky lullaby.

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

He remembered.

Deep inhale. Exhale.
Three more, to four.
If you still see red,
then count to more.

He breathed.

Counted.

Put in the appetizers.

Ordered the drinks.

Refilled the sodas.

Skipped the bread.

Fuck that bread.

Maybe they'd forget.

They didn't need that many carbs anyway.

He kept moving.

By now, he wasn't managing tables.

He was shadowing a stage play.

Dodging cues in scenes already bleeding into the next act.

Switching gears every three minutes.

Smiling through all of it.

His face felt like performance art.

And still, Table 41 outshined everyone in sheer, effortless asshole energy.

Everything went back out.

Both steaks.

Both salads.

The asparagus.

Refills.

Six lemon wedges.

One lonely lime.

And again,

it wasn't right.

The men laid out their new grievances like prosecutors preparing exhibits.

Filet guy, the taller one, held court with a pained expression, pointing at the pink center like it had insulted his bloodline.

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

He offered the standard fix. Quick up-cook. A minute or two.

The man looked at him like he was an idiot man speaking and idiot language.

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

No reason.

No logic.

Just a challenge.

Another test.

And again, he had choices.

Explain.

Resist.

Rage.

Instead, he smiled.

"Of course, sir."

Then steak-frites guy gestured to his own plate.

The meat had been sliced into clean strips and fanned across the porcelain like a medical exhibit. Beside it sat a tablet propped upright. On-screen: a diagram of steak doneness.

Temperature.

Color.

Cross-sections.

A digital autopsy.

The man didn't ask a question.

Just leaned back and waved toward the screen.

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

A trap.

The answer didn't matter.

Only the act of making him say it.

He glanced at the chart.

Then the steak.

Textbook medium.

No question.

Still, he answered gently.

Evenly.

No edge.

No sigh.

No judgment.

"Medium, sir."

The man smiled and lifted his glass.

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

There it was.

Not about the food.

Never was with these kind.

The air changed.

Barely.

The hairs on his forearms lifted beneath his sleeves.

Across the table, one of the women rubbed at her arms.

"Did they crank the AC?"

"Probably," the taller man said, glancing toward the vent above the table ceiling.

For a heartbeat, every wineglass on the table sang.

Just a thin crystalline note that seemed to come from nowhere.

It stopped.

The taller man looked around.

"Another breach?"

"Must be," steak-frites guy muttered, already turning back to his plate.

The moment passed.

So did they.

His eyes traveled down the server in black.

Slow enough to catch the sweat-dark collar, the frayed apron strap, the tired shoes.

A full scan.

A full dismissal.

The table behind them went still.

Someone coughed.

Someone paused mid-bite.

That must've been the women's cue.

The salads were fine this time.

Technically.

They'd keep them.

Technically.

But only to the side.

"We'll wait until our husbands get theirs," one said, like she was granting mercy.

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

A warning disguised as a passing comment.

He didn't explain.

Didn't tell them ten tickets sat ahead of theirs.

Didn't tell them the expo manager was fighting for her life in the bathroom.

Didn't tell them Jim GM was seconds from detonation.

Didn't tell them the broiler cook was still being held together by bourbon and bad luck.

Didn't tell them that half the dining room had already sent steaks back that night.

Didn't tell them that somehow, against every reasonable odd, both of theirs had come out perfect.

Twice.

They'd set the terms.

If the steaks came late, or the salad proteins cooled, they wouldn't ask for replacements.

They'd expect them.

Deep inhale. Exhale.
Three more, to four.
If you still see red,
count to more.

First breath in.

Thin smile.

He couldn't quite look at them anymore.

But he still didn't flinch.

Didn't blink.

He turned.

Exhaled.

Walked toward the kitchen.

And laughed.

Not because it was funny.

Just because the alternative felt...hotter.

Still chasing those three breaths, he imagined what had to be Table 41's pregame huddle.

Center field.

Stadium lights washing the grass silver.

The four of them crouched low like champions preparing for the biggest game of the year.

The stands packed with fifty thousand people just like them. Entire generations who got their kicks from making strangers miserable.

Somewhere across town, another team of assholes was surely running the same playbook at another restaurant.

At midnight, they'd compare stats.

"Alright, team," steak-frites guy said. *"We walk in like we've never seen a menu. Order whatever we want. Then pretend it's wrong."*

"Doesn't matter if it's perfect," salmon Caesar woman added. *"We stall. We complain. We play dumb."*

Filet guy nodded solemnly.

"We delay our pleasure and disrupt his flow. Bonus points if we stay polite. Makes it harder to push back."

"And if anyone corrects us?" the other woman asked, all innocence.

"We get hurt," they answered. *"Deeply disappointed."*

"And when the timing's right?"

"Boom. Manager."

"He apologizes for something that never happened."

"Comps the meal."

"And probably the next one."

"Because that's just what we do."

They stacked their hands.

The crowd went wild.

Air horns blared.

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three!”

“GASLIGHT!”

The huddle broke.

They jogged to the line of scrimmage.

Predators in heels and cufflinks.

Ready to take the field.

It was the only explanation that made sense.

He made it one and a half deep breaths before bailing.

Set the plate on the pass line.

Calm hands.

Tight jaw.

Then rattled off Table 41’s complaints to Jim on expo and the broiler cook.

No debate.

No discussion.

Just facts.

Then gone.

He drifted to the sink and leaned back against the stainless steel. Coolness seeped through his shirt and into his lower spine like relief.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

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

"How's your section?"

"Fine. The usual. Except I'm about two minutes from ending everyone at Table 41. Two steak re-cooks and counting."

She 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, then cap it off with a one-star review saying all their shit was cold."

"Okay, but real shit, was it cold? You know Emilio's on sides and..."

"Unlike Derek, Emilio's sober tonight. Miraculously. I checked. Those asparagus could cauterize a wound."

Jazz snorted and nudged him with her elbow.

Just enough.

Enough to remind him he was here.

Not in the stadium.

Not the subject of a huddle.

Here.

For a second, that was enough.

Enough to breathe.

Enough to think:

Alright.

You got this.

Kill them with kindness.

Jazz nodded toward the pass.

"You want me to run the re-fire when it comes up?"

He shook his head.

"Nah. I got it. Just gotta breathe and remember not everyone sucks."

He pushed off the sink.

Back to the floor.

No standing around.

Bills.

Desserts.

Silverware.

One table cashed out.

Another sat before the chairs cooled.

He stopped by Table 33 first.

Quince still hadn't made it back.

The lone diner had finished his steak. His book lay open beside the empty plate, one earbud in, the other resting against his collar.

"...I know," the man said softly.

His voice caught.

"No... I know."

The server slipped the plate away without a sound.

Topped off the sparkling water.

Set the dessert menu beside the book.

The man glanced up, eyes wet but smiling.

He placed a hand lightly over the menu and gave the smallest nod. A silent message.

Thank you.

I'll get to it.

The server returned the nod and moved on.

Behind him, the conversation continued.

"...I missed you too."

He didn't hear the rest.

Maybe it was an ex.

Maybe it was an old friend.

A father.

A mother.

A sister.

Someone who'd finally called back.

Someone worth crying over.

He never knew.

That was the thing about serving.

You almost never got the whole story.

Just enough to remember there always was one.

Table 41 barely looked up.

He topped off waters.

Dropped fresh sodas.

Asked if everything was alright.

One of the men glanced at him just long enough to register that the replacement steak still hadn't arrived.

Disappointment.

Then their conversation swallowed them again.

Something vibrated beneath his fingertips.

Not the glass.

The table itself.

So faint he wondered if he'd imagined it.

The silverware gave a whisper against the wood.

Just once.

He froze.

Nobody looked up.

Nobody paused.

Nobody reacted.

The conversation rolled on uninterrupted.

He stared another second.

Nothing.

His jaw tightened.

Maybe he'd felt his own pulse.

Maybe.

He walked away.

Somewhere between clearing plates, greeting a new two-top, and going back to get 41's food, the mantra found him again.

Inhale four.

Exhale four.

Again.

Enough to steady his hands.

Then finally:

Third round.

Chef double-checked the plates himself.

Jim stood at the pass, arms folded, watching like it was a final exam.

He even gave a solemn little nod.

The kitchen rallied.

Not because he demanded it.

He never did.

But they could see it.

He was close tonight.

And that wasn't like him.

So they pulled strings.

Skipped tickets.

Cut corners.

The server in black carried the re-cooks like relics.

Balanced.

Deliberate.

One breath.

One prayer.

The women looked up first.

Then the men.

He placed the filet before the taller man and turned to the steak frites.

The filet guy blinked.

Looked down.

Then up.

Something flickered across his face.

Discomfort.

Maybe guilt.

"Looks great," he said.

And meant it.

For a second, it seemed like the night might turn.

Maybe it had all been theater.

Maybe the curtain had fallen.

Then steak-frites guy jabbed a finger into the crust and pushed the plate an inch away.

A deep sigh.

"My god, how hard...I asked for *medium*," he said slowly. "Not... this."

The plate clinked politely 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 field?"

There it was again.

That little blade disguised as courtesy.

Sharp enough to draw blood.

Dull enough to make you question whether you'd imagined it.

He didn't flinch.

Didn't argue.

Barely breathed.

Kill them with kindness.

Kill them with kindness.

Kill them with kindness.

He slowed his movements.

Forced a smile carved from stone.

Then, as if summoned by tension itself, the salmon Caesar woman cleared her throat.

“Excuse me,” she said, peering past her untouched plate. “What was that salad they made over there?”

She gestured vaguely across the room.

“With the cart?”

He glanced.

Tableside Caesar.

Premium add-on.

Anchovy.

Egg.

Dijon.

Made fresh in front of the guests.

His pulse quickened.

Surely she wasn’t—

“Tableside Caesar, ma’am.”

“Oh,” she said, eyes lighting up. “That looks much better than these.”

She pushed her salad away like a dirty napkin.

“And it’s so big, I think we’ll just split one,” 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.

His eye twitched.

Somewhere deep inside, something cracked.

Not loudly.

Not visibly.

Just a hairline fracture in the beams.

He looked away.

Past Table 41.

Find something steady.

His eyes landed on a quiet two-top across the dining room just as their server finished pouring a glass of red.

The woman reached for it.

Pop.

The bowl of the wineglass burst apart in her hand.

Red wine splashed across the tablecloth.

She yelped.

The man beside her shot to his feet.

Half the dining room looked over.

Their server, Yaya, was there almost instantly.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry."

She was already gathering the stem and scattered glass.

"I must've pulled it too hot out of the washer."

She shook her head.

"Thermal shock."

"Happens once in a while."

The couple exchanged a look.

The woman laughed it off.

"It scared me more than anything."

Within moments the room had stitched itself back together.

He realized he'd been staring.

Then looked back at Table 41.

The filet guy stayed quiet.

Stared at his plate.

Then at him.

For a moment, their eyes met.

There was a shadow of sympathy there.

Regret, maybe.

But not enough.

Not enough to stop anything.

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 just barely stalled the pounding in his core, turned without a word, and walked calmly back toward the line.

Inside, he saw red.

The hallway felt narrower than before, the walls leaning in while he'd been gone. Waiting. Listening.

There was no draft, but the air moved anyway.

Heavy.

Close.

Wrong in a way you could taste.

And somewhere inside the pressure, the muttering started.

Low.

Sharp.

Fast.

Phrases tumbling over each other.

"'You sure you're in the right field?' I'll show you a fuckin' field, 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..."

"...I fuckin' hate people..."

"...this whole place, man. Why do I even try? Like they don't even have fuckin' sporgleé."

Honestly, that should've told him everything.

He drew a breath.

Failed to cool the bloom spreading across his shoulders.

Looked down at the steak.

Perfect medium.

Still hot.

Still salvageable.

"Don't conflate," he whispered.

An old mantra.

A life raft.

Kill them with kindness.

But the words had begun shedding weight.

Only the first half remained.

Kill them.

Kill them.

Kill them.

At the threshold, the air thickened again.

His fingers had gone numb around the plate.

The pressure lived behind his eyes now.

Down his spine.

Turning the room dreamlike.

His temple twitched.

The edges of his vision pulsed.

There were options.

Scream.

Throw the plate.

Call the manager.

Flip the table.

Curb stomp that smug steak-frites bastard.

Walk out forever.

Cry.

Fake a smile.

Swallow the fire.

But none of it touched the thing inside him.

The engine he'd spent years pretending wasn't there.

He didn't want to pretend anymore.

Not tonight.

The plate trembled.

He stepped onto the line.

Sound warped.

Too close.

Too far.

A soda hissed too loudly.

Laughter echoed.

The lights didn't flicker. But the shadows shifted. Conversations slowed. People noticed something.

Unsure of what.

Just *something*.

The light above pulsed once.

Cups rattled in their stacks.

Wineglasses rang with thin crystalline notes.

Jazz looked up.

Confused.

He pressed his fists against his thighs.

Every tendon drawn 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 reached his throat.

His voice came out thin.

Not from fear.

Because speaking was the most human thing left.

"I tried."

A breath.

"I really..."

There was the problem.

Anger was never meant to live this long.

Left alone, it flared.

Fought.

Burned.

Then passed.

But buried long enough...

It stopped being anger.

It fermented.

Pressure became resentment.

Resentment became rage.

And rage...

Rage only knew how to become catastrophe.

He'd spent years believing restraint and repression were the same thing.

They weren't.

One was wisdom.

The other was a dam.

And every dam eventually met its flood.

For no reason he could name, he heard his mother's voice.

Not loud.

Just remembered.

"You always feel everything so deeply."

He'd hated when she said that.

Thought she was calling him weak.

Thought the answer was to carry more.

To swallow more.

To prove that nothing could reach him.

Years later, he finally had.

The trouble with swallowing fire...

was that eventually it wanted back out.

"...Fuck it."

So he made the choice.

Or maybe...

it made him.

Three sharp blinks.

Intentional.

Activation.

Like throwing a breaker behind his eyes.

Heat answered.

Not around him.

Inside him.

Like something ancient had been waiting politely for permission.

The room inhaled.

The plates lifted first.

Salad bowls.

Dinnerware.

Bread plates.

Dessert trays.

They rose with the soft hum of static, as though gravity had misplaced them.

Then the knives.

Forks.

Spoons.

Tongs.

Thermometers.

The caviar spoons someone swore had gone missing last week.

Bone saws from the butcher block.

Polished steel trembled in midair like breath trapped in winter.

Metal began to sing.

Not loudly.

Every wineglass on every table answered the floating metal with its own crystalline note.

One note.

Then another.

Then hundreds.

A choir of trembling glass.

Jim staggered back.

Hands half-raised.

Someone gasped.

Someone prayed.

A server dropped an entire display tray.

The crash disappeared beneath the rising chorus.

Steel.

Glass.

Ceramic.

Every hard thing in the restaurant humming together.

The sound built until it stopped sounding like metal and glass at all.

It sounded...

Hungry.

The server in black snapped his fingers.

Everything shattered.

Ceramic.

Steel.

Glass.

Bone china.

A reversed explosion.

Shards and silver dust spiraled upward into a glittering storm.

Nothing fell.

Everything climbed.

The restaurant held its breath.

Then reality began to disagree with itself.

The grout between the tiles unraveled first.

Hairline cracks of light spread through the floor.

The overhead fixtures flickered.

Not on.

Not off.

Uncertain.

The air grew heavier, pressing against lungs and eardrums alike.

The walls shivered.

The booths blurred at the edges.

The polished bar lost its reflection.

Like the room couldn't remember what it was supposed to be.

And then—

It broke.

The restaurant broke.

Tile dissolved.

Fixtures vanished.

Walls peeled away into drifting vapor.

Booths.

The bar.

The kitchen.

Gone.

Only the tables remained.

The guests.

The skyline.

And behind him, a pale dome of light wrapped itself around the staff.

Above them, the storm tightened.

Faster.

Closer.

Fragments circling until there was no space between them.

Only motion.

Only pressure.

Until they collapsed inward.

Not into a weapon.

Into something alive enough to pretend.

A swollen heart of obsidian blades and writhing steel.

It pulsed.

Once.

Silence.

Again.

The metal answered.

The city answered.

High above, three massive blimps continued tracing their concentric paths.

One low.

One higher.

One near orbital.

None of them slowed.

Beyond them, the glideveins arched across the heavens.

Lit from within.

Alive with motion.

Rivers threading the stars.

The world continued.

As if catastrophe had merely become another weather pattern.

Jim took a trembling step forward.

Hands raised.

“L-l-listen...”

His voice cracked.

“Whatever this is...”

Another stutter.

“D-d-d-don’t do it.”

His eyes shone.

“Please.”

“P-please, Z...”

The server in black didn’t answer.

He whispered a word.

One syllable.

Soft.

Foreign.

Weightless as fog.

It landed like law.

Light rippled from his chest.

Low.

Perfectly horizontal.

Like a stone dropped into still water.

The wave spread across the shattered lot.

Passing through cooks.

Servers.

Hosts.

Support.

The expo manager, still frozen mid-wipe.

Even the coworkers he didn’t particularly like.

It covered them all.

One Family.

One Focus.

Corporate fluff on aprons.

Truth, here.

They weren't his real family.

His real family was...

Something else.

Something better left unnamed.

But aside from Old Harry, these people had been his first human family.

And though he had to let them go...

He would not let them bleed.

Above him, the heart twitched.

Then bled.

Shapes peeled away from its surface.

Slowly.

Then all at once.

Long obsidian shards descended without a sound.

Cold as night.

Sharp as judgment.

Not all were spikes.

Some curved into the shape of the spetum.

Harry had once described dozens of ancient polearms.

That was the one he'd remembered.

Pierce.

Slice.

Adapt.

The shape had stayed with him.

So had the anger.

Some fell point-first.

Others turned crescent-forward.

One pierced.

The next carved.

Table 41 was first.

Steak-frites guy took the opening strike through the shoulder.

Pinned to the asphalt like an insect.

Another through the thigh.

Another through the hand.

Precise.

Methodical.

The woman beside him cried out as a crescent blade swept across her middle, dropping her before the sound had finished leaving her mouth.

The other two ducked.

Shielded.

Reached for one another.

None of it mattered.

The storm had no malice.

Only momentum.

One begged.

One prayed.

A stranger beneath another table folded silently to the pavement, lips still moving around words no one would hear.

Then the world found its voice.

One scream.

Then another.

Then hundreds.

The crowd shattered.

Chairs overturned.

Glasses burst beneath running feet.

Shoes slipped.

Bodies collided.

A woman scooped up her toddler.

A couple dove into an SUV.

Keys fumbled.

Doors slammed.

Engines roared.

Across the strip mall, shoppers stopped.

Turned.

Saw the sky bleeding blades.

A man dropped his smoothie.

A teenager raised a phone.

Two people ran.

Then six.

Then twenty.

Panic became a stampede.

He watched it spread with detached clarity.

The parking lot.

Flat.

Wrong.

Empty.

An irregularity in a city built upward.

As was he.

And for the first time that night, he felt grateful for both.

Less density.

Less collateral.

The thought surprised him.

Then the core over Table 41 ruptured.

Not explosively.

Purposefully.

It flowered.

Smaller cores peeling away, each finding its own orbit.

Its own hunger.

And the rain widened.

Spikes split in midair.

Curving into hooked crescents.

Point.

Blade.

Pierce.

Carve.

One punched through a storefront and tore its way out the opposite wall.

Another found a windshield, then kept going.

The storm crossed rooftops.

Vehicles.

Concrete.

Glass.

Steel.

Everything yielded.

Split.

Split.

Split.

An engine block ruptured.

Fire blossomed.

A bus skidded sideways beneath a hail of obsidian.

Streetlights folded.

Traffic signals disappeared.

The city itself seemed to recoil.

Running didn't matter.

Screaming didn't matter.

Pleading didn't matter.

Bleeding didn't matter.

The blades never hesitated.

They simply arrived.

Every target became a destination already chosen.

And somewhere inside him, something terrible finally relaxed.

The anger was gone.

Not because it had healed.

Because it had become everything else.

The noise dulled first.

Screams.

Sirens.

The percussion of impact.

Everything softened, as though the world had slipped beneath deep water.

Motion blurred.

He stopped counting.

Stopped noticing which blades pierced and which carved.

Stopped choosing.

Stopped thinking.

He simply let the storm happen.

At the center of it all, wrapped in a pale 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 above the pass.

A server remained frozen mid-step, tray balanced effortlessly in the air.

They were safe.

Because he'd made a promise.

One Family.

One Focus.

Back home, focus had been the problem.

He'd held too tightly.

Wanted too much.

Ignored the one person who never let small things go.

What he'd done there hadn't been small.

Here, at least, he'd tried.

Had been trying.

But every caged inferno dreams of burning.

Restraint is only combustion slowed.

Never stopped.

The heat began to ebb.

Not vanish.

Retreat.

Like tide pulling back from a beach littered with wreckage.

Only then did he truly see what he'd done.

The glideveins hung split open, pouring pressurized water into the sky in silver torrents.

Office towers stood pierced through.

Others leaned, half-shorn, shedding glass into streets that no longer existed.

Obsidian spetum constructs still drifted overhead, rotating lazily, dripping molten light.

Others remained buried deep inside skyscrapers, holding them open like wedges in split timber.

Fires roared.

Smoke climbed.

Sirens wailed beneath the groan of failing steel.

Cars burned where they had stopped.

The restaurant was gone.

The skyline itself looked wounded.

Then his eyes found a man.

Or what remained of one.

About his own age.

Table 33.

Dining alone.

Steak.

Sparkling water.

Earbuds.

A book resting beside the plate.

The quiet one who'd thanked him every time he topped off the glass.

Now the table was gone.

The chair was gone.

Only the blacktop remained.

His earbud was still in.

Stained.

One arm twisted beneath him.

The other outstretched.

Red to the wrist.

Blood had settled into every crease of his hand, every fingertip, as though he'd tried to hold himself together and failed.

He hadn't complained.

Hadn't delayed a ticket.

Hadn't raised his voice.

He'd simply been there.

Wrong place.

Wrong time.

His.

He'd overdone it.

Again.

He closed his eyes.

Exhaled.

“Yeah,” he rasped.

“So… clearly I quit.”

Then he whispered another word.

The air didn’t move.

It rearranged.

Sound folded inward.

Light slowed.

Somewhere beyond sight, unseen lattices slid across one another like cooling glass.

The word wasn’t sound.

It was shape.

A correction drawn through a greater geometry.

He opened the flow.

Offered a portion.

Snapped.

Reality convulsed.

The city inhaled in reverse.

Ash streamed upward.

Bodies knit from bone to breath.

Blood threaded back into veins.

Screams folded into silence.

Glass swam into frames.

Towers straightened.

Collapsed skyscrapers rose from the streets they’d crushed.

The distant waterfalls climbed back into the overhead glideveins.

Clear tubes sealed.

Pressurized.

And hummed again like one colossal lung.

Fires unburned.

Smoke unraveled.

Roads smoothed.

Cars remembered themselves.

Spetum blades unwound into vapor.

And vanished.

Until, just like that,

the city

and the restaurant

were whole again.

As though catastrophe had merely changed its mind.

He wished people worked that way.

The temptation never disappeared.

That was the part no one understood.

When destruction could be undone...

it stopped feeling permanent.

Every outburst became negotiable.

Every terrible decision whispered the same lie.

You can always put it back.

That was how monsters reasoned.

One exception.

One correction.

One last time.

Until "last time" became a life.

His chest tightened.

The hum remained beneath his skin.

Current trapped inside bone.

The cost had been small.

This time.

But something had still noticed.

Always noticed.

Some wounds rewound.

Some debts did not.

Some things couldn't be undone.

Table 41 sat intact.

Alive.

Perfect.

But every eye was wide.

Every breath shallow.

They remembered.

For now.

He stepped forward.

Slow.

Level.

Steak-frites guy flinched.

Cried.

Pissed himself.

"That was your third steak frites."

"Third time it was perfect."

The man's mouth trembled.

Tears rolled down his face.

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

A warning.

A promise.

Another snap.

The memory came apart.

Not erased.

Lifted.

Like fog surrendering to morning.

They forgot.

Him.

The destruction.

The fear.

The city blinked.

The restaurant blinked.

A hostess seated a new couple.

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 and was seventy left with a young businessman.

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

People confessed.

Lied.

Laughed.

Failed beautifully.

Broke bread.

At Table 41, a man cut into his steak.

Pink.

Medium.

He took a bite.

Raised his eyes.

Let the flavor settle on his tongue.

And, for reasons he could never explain,

felt profoundly grateful.

It was perfect.



That night, he packed.

Just a long, structured black leather bag.

No magic required.

He wanted to stay.

No one remembered.

No one ever did.

The city had reassembled.

Bodies unbled.

Screams rewound like tape.

But that wasn't how it worked.

Not for him.

When he lost control like that,

he had to leave.

Always.

Because of what it left behind.

Residue.

The one thing he couldn't reverse.

So he caught a midnight glidevein to a city he'd never seen.

The pod was nearly empty, its cabin glowing beneath the ripple-light of the water rushing overhead. He sat awake the entire trip, watching dark fish drift past the window like thoughts he couldn't quite hold.

He rented a room by the week in a skyscraper bordering a Zone of Corporate Interest.

Walked the river at dawn.

Mist curled off the water like breath.

Birds woke in pairs.

Then flocks.

Rising together in synchronized arcs that painted black silhouettes across the watercolor sky.

A new city.

A new pace.

A new place.

A new name.

Hopefully a new family.

A new focus.

A new distraction.

That morning, the breeze carried something floral.

Half perfume.

Half memory.

Sweet.

Spiced.

Almost like something he'd once craved.

Once loved.

Behind him came laughter.
Running footsteps.
Maybe a couple.
Maybe a family beginning their day.
The whole world felt gently in motion.
He looked down at his hands.
No glow.
No tremor.
Just hands.
Human hands.
He closed them into fists.
Opened them again.
And sighed.
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.
An older kind of inferno.
And of what people could be.
And of how euphoric it felt to be rageful.
To be righteous.
So the man-shaped inferno,
the one who’d always felt too much,
smiled.
Small.
Private.

Almost playful.

Maybe rot always got the last word.

Maybe his mother had been right.

"...Unless I have to."

THANKS

If you've made it this far, thank you.

Maybe the story hooked you, maybe you just had to know how it ended—either way, I'm grateful.

Stories live by word of mouth.

If you liked this one, the best thing you can do is share it. Send it to a friend. Post it. Recommend it to someone who never reads—especially them.

And if you feel like it, I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Send me a DM. Email me. Tell me if you loved it. Tell me if you didn't. Just... say something.

Because stories don't exist in a vacuum.

They live through the people who carry them forward.

Now—about what comes next.

What you're about to read is *Down South*, part two of this world and this character's journey. It's the next chapter in what I've loosely outlined as a 20-part series. Where it ends? I'm still figuring that out. Maybe it becomes a novel. Maybe it unfolds piece by piece. Maybe something entirely unexpected happens.

All I know is I love writing it—and I hope you'll love reading it.

So here it is: the beginning of a new part, and a new life for our protagonist.

Let's see where it leads.

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EXCERPT: DOWN SOUTH

In his new city—humid, river-edged, all brick-fronted shops and oaks too big for their sidewalks—he started over.

New pace.

New place.

New name.

New apartment.

New job.

He hadn't planned it. Never used magic to choose; that felt like cheating. Instead, he wandered until a place told him who to be—mornings through peeling porches, slow-talking barbershops, heat shimmering off cracked pavement.

Overhead, only two blimps—one low, one high—drifted like moths on invisible threads. Most cities had dozens now, spirals of megastructures powering three-quarters of urban life. Above them, a single glidevein arched between distant pylons, a glass artery lit from within, an entire river rerouted through the sky.

Here? Two blimps. One glidevein. Enough—and even those seemed reluctant.

From above, it might've looked like the green was gone. It wasn't. Just... reassigned. "Zones of Corporate Interest"—preserved parcels of land for market testing, demographic calibration, ecological regression. Names changed; purpose didn't. More green, more blue, fewer shadows overhead.

Something clicked. He liked it in the ZCI. Once that click happened, getting in was easy. Leases, interviews, first

impressions—never obstacles. Not with his face, his charm, his magic. Which meant he'd never know what it was to want and be denied. Not like people did. That was its own curse.

Here, the ZCI leaned rural. Quiet. Residents were testers—paid to live "normal" lives. Drive pre-release pickups. Smoke engineered tobacco. Hunt with prototype rifles. Drink test-batch beer and swear the last one tasted better. Their job: be themselves. Just... watched. The performance of tradition. The illusion of slowness. All of it data.

And even corporate towns needed mail.

The Postal Union still existed, technically—now a wing of ProxiDrop, the hemisphere's largest logistics chain. "Local" meant anything within a hundred miles; everything else ran through the rest of the building.

The warehouse was four football fields under one roof, ringed by loading loops and capped with repair bays, cafeterias, and dorm floors for overnight crews. ProxiDrop's floor was vast—towering aisles, robot dollies gliding on mag-tracks, racks swiveling and rising to meet human hands. Parcels scanned, sorted, funneled into conveyors feeding outbound fleets like a bloodstream.

The Postal Union's corner was smaller, slower, built for touch over speed. No mag-tracks, just rolling cages and waist-high chutes. The air smelled of paper and plastic wrap. Same faces most mornings—like a small-town post office trapped inside a megastructure.

He liked postal work—mornings misty and half-asleep. Bad coffee in the breakroom. The hiss of steam rollers flattening poly-mail. Reading codes until they blurred into muscle memory, sliding parcels down chutes with a flick of the wrist. Watching chaos fall into numbered stacks felt clean in a way most things didn't anymore.

Sometimes he'd be reassigned to ProxiDrop's floor—faster, louder, a chorus of scanners and hydraulic sighs as forklifts set down pallet-sized loads. Outside, vans and long-haulers idled in tight rows, roofs fitted with pods that could drop parcels straight to doorsteps.

For a few weeks, he almost felt normal. Had a shift. Packed his own lunch. Learned the warehouse rhythms: when dollies slowed at changeover, when belts ran too fast, when the foreman's voice meant something had gone wrong in a corner you'd never see.

Even here, there were small angers—wrong barcodes jammed to gum up a line, a rack "accidentally" parked across a dock, a chute stopped so another team fell behind. Harmless, petty. Everyone needed somewhere to put their fire.

Those he could stand.

It seemed like a good fit.

Then Marnie started talking—and he was reminded, as he often was, of something Old Harry had told him on the island.

The tide had been low that evening, black stones glistening where the water pulled back. By his body's clock, he was eighteen—a year since leaving home—though a year earlier he'd

been an infant, half-buried in kelp and sand, certain to die if the old man hadn't found him. They'd sat on a driftwood log, salt drying on their skin, fire popping in the wind. Old Harry hunched forward, long arms on his knees, turning a polished piece of bone in his hands.

"The war," he said without looking up, "was generations back—the last one worth spilling for—before boardrooms took the place of battlefields."

He told him about the women who filled the gaps: boots in mud, hands on triggers, voices in every room where power was traded or stolen. About the implants—biomechanical seeds that rewired glands to flood the air with chemical commands: fear, trust, lust, obedience.

Side A's tech was clean, tested, removable.

Side B's wasn't.

By the third year, no one bothered removing them. By war's end, three in ten women couldn't survive without the hardware—and couldn't die without passing it on. Side A stripped the seeds from their own. Side B's women had no such mercy. Most were killed. A few—pregnant, hiding, smuggled out—kept the seeds alive in bloodlines scattered across the new corporate empire like tolerated ghosts. A legal gray area. A superstition in flesh. Remnants of a people erased so thoroughly their homeland didn't appear on modern maps.

Over the years, the world named them in a dozen ways. In some cities, *Hormistress* was a brothel word—used for the kind who could pull coin from a man's pocket without him ever

feeling robbed. In port towns, *Chemisiren* was a warning shouted down a dock when a ship took on the wrong passenger. *Glandmother* belonged to women old enough to remember before dampening systems laced every wall and street.

The old man had said their danger was never just the chemistry—it was how quickly the world learned to build itself around it. That was why dampening existed. That was why some businesses kept the 'No Femalen' sign invisible but understood.

Now that history stood in front of him.

Marnie moved like someone who had never doubted her place in her own skin—broad hips, full chest, shorts clinging to the thigh. Down her centerline ran the telltale seam: a narrow strip of grown metal starting high at her forehead and vanishing beneath her shirt.

Somewhere far back, one of her foremothers had fought on the front lines, carrying the seed in her chest until her enemies broke or obeyed. She'd survived long enough to pass it on—daughter, niece, sister—because as long as a female relative lived, the seed could jump. Generation after generation, the tech stopped staying tech. Armor fused to the body's hormone-map: curling behind the eyes, sealing the throat, widening over the sternum, sweeping the ribs, flaring at the adrenal glands, tapering smooth across the pelvis.

A mutation no one planned, and no one could undo.