

Bully-Boy

Sous

"C'mon, pull yourself together. Don't let him see you like this, he'll only go harder on you."

I passed her a towelette and left her to her misery.

This wasn't the first time she'd fallen apart. I'd known her a long time and she was not easily rattled. We'd been friends, then peers, then colleagues. She was an old family friend, living next door to us during those formative years between eleven and fourteen before her folks split and she moved across to the continent with her mum. It's no secret she was my first crush.

Those first flushes of love, or something like it, slowly faded, replaced by the warm glow of camaraderie and the cold strength of mutual respect.

I'd seen her stand up to giants, huge hulking men and women with no sympathy, no understanding. Captains who ruled by fear, chefs who'd rather carve you than the hog.

But the Bully Boy was different.

Meaner, smarter, a cruel and ancient soul brought back from the dark ages to torment us.

I'm not a religious man or I'd swear he was one of the seraphim, alighting on the earth to set a test of character. But even angels must have pity, for all their lofty wisdom they must feel also.

The Bully Boy feels nothing.

It's my break, fifteen paltry minutes between prep and the big show.

I've spent ten trying to restore the spirit of a woman who I'd always thought had a will of iron.

When her parents divorced she was the mediator, offering condolences, explanations and sympathy to both the instigators and the befuddled public; none for herself. Stoic.

Now she's crying in the changing room because one man has found out how to unwind her.

Like a clock. He's found what makes her tick, that solemn understanding so many lovers yearn for of each other, the lifeline that elucidates the soul of another.

Daily he is killing her. It started small, probing questions, sly asides.

He gauges your reactions, like a jungle predator, espying any weakness he can use as a foothold.

Once he finds it he latches on, like a limpet crab clinging to a rock.

He begins to squeeze.

I finish my cigarette and return to the kitchen.

I'm early.

Even the kitchen seems to reflect this man's character.

No sleekly polished machine this! The bare minimum done to keep the health and safety brigade away. There are things in the dark corners of this kitchen that would make a cook with any semblance of pride weep.

Oh, it looks clean!

Only someone who works here daily could even begin to comprehend the chaos that lurks beneath.

A row of neatly organised spices on the upper shelf. I remove one and hear a tinkling noise as something falls. Through the gap of order lie half filled pots and jars, covered in dust, some open, some closed, some broken, arrayed haphazardly one upon the other. One careless motion and this shelf comes rattling down, as it has so many times before on the heads of an unsuspecting newbie.

Then he strikes.

It's no one's fault, can you blame the fly for falling into a web?

"Congratulations dipshit, you've just volunteered to re-order the spice shelf. Hope you didn't have plans tonight, maybe a night out with that sexy young thing you parade around on your arm?

The fuck does she see in you? She'd be better off with a real man, someone with a deft touch, not some buffoon with the grace of a fucking retarded elephant! I'm afraid the only heat you'll be feeling tonight is the heat of paprika on your fingers..."

We'll come in the next morning, the spice rack is perfect. But not for old bully-boy.

He'll re-prime the trap, pulling what he needs to the front, casting everything back in behind and wait for his next victim. I haven't seen a bay leaf in over a year. I know they're in there but I'll never

fall for that trap. Not again.

There are worse fates in store too, every surface is a hazard.

I hear sniffle behind me as Cleo enters the kitchen.

She looks better. Red rimmed eyes, but they're hard now.

It was her tenderness I adored. She could look at you and see right into your marrow, to whatever worry or doubt was hiding there and tend it.

I often thought she should have been a nurse or maybe an aid worker in some far flung, war torn country. Tending wounded young soldiers, giving comfort and solace to people who have none. When my dad died she was the one who found me. I couldn't handle all the platitudes and niceties.

The black ties, the handshakes and vultures crowding around.

There was this old abandoned warehouse a couple of streets down from my parents place that we used to play in when we were young. When it rained the water would tinkle down through old pipes and over broken glass to form puddles on the ground. The noise of it was soothing, like some natural music or long forgotten alchemical reaction between rust and rainwater.

I was sitting there numb, stoned on shitty weed I'd found in my bedroom, leftovers from my dishonest teenage years. It was raining. My god it was pouring.

I felt I was about to dissolve with the weight of that sorrow, join one of those little puddles and just cease to be. I couldn't even cry, it made me so guilty that I couldn't shed a tear for this man who'd raised me and loved me. I let the rain be my surrogate tear ducts and I smoked and buried myself in my misery. Then she walked in.

"I thought I'd find you here. Your mum's going spare, she thought you'd run off or been in an accident."

I swear she was covered in light. I couldn't even speak.

I guess the grief, compounded by the shock of seeing her there, at that moment, like some long dormant lighthouse suddenly blazing into life of its own accord, rendered me senseless.

I'm sure the weed didn't help either. She took one look at me, walked over and wrapped her arms around me and I felt something crack. I didn't even know I'd been holding back, but all at once it hit me, really hit me, the realisation that my father was no longer of this earth and I cried.

Could have been hours, or only seconds, but my grief poured out as the rain fizzled out and still she held me, until I had nothing left to cry.

A tiny ray of sunshine squeezed through a crack in the rafters and illuminated her face.

"Sorry about your dad. Remember the time we got super drunk together and tried to act out Hamlet?"

Now you have to remember that in time of tragedy people have a tendency to remember the brightest moments of a persons life. In the wake of a death you get regaled of the high points in the life of the deceased, inevitably these are dry, dusty and utterly boring.

Cleo was never a normal person, to say she was inappropriate at times would be to call a skyscraper 'rather tall'.

I am momentarily twelve years old again, watching her climb onto my fathers shoulder to administer poison to his ear, only to have him belch explosively and send her sprawling to her floor.

Hamlets father should have been a drunk, it may have saved his life.

I laughed so hard I may have cracked a rib.

That's the kind of person she is.

A little levity in an overly serious situation, a little candle in the dark.

Only now I see that candle go out, little by little, day by day.

There is no doubt in my mind that one of them must leave here.

If Cleo stays, she will never be the same. The Bully-Boy is too old, too set in his ways to be changed now. But something has to be done.

Cleo begins to sharpen her knives, the silence broken occasionally by a sniffle, each a nail to my chest in the oppression of this miserable place.

She's a wonderful cook and utterly wasted here.

Our first day she made a magnificent mushroom risotto, One of those oh so simple dishes that hides

it's complexity within the ease of it's preparation and the easy acquisition of it's components. It's a dish that comes to life under close supervision and diligence. Like all great dishes it's success or failure lies in it's creator's understanding of it. Any fool can make a pile of medium grained rice with some field mushrooms, but it takes a special sort of soul to administer the broth in scant ladlefuls, waiting patiently as it's absorbed only to add another tiny drop, ad nauseum until the dishes decadent completion. I can make a risotto, but not like Cleo.

She's like a mother with a hungry child, sating it's hunger bit by bit, never over filling.

It's a dish that only love can create.

The Bully-Boy tried it.

"Hmmm. A lot of effort for rice. How would you find time to prepare this for 30 people?"

He tries again.

"Not enough salt, didn't anyone teach you how to season? We're a five star restaurant, not some back alley Osteria handing out rustic bowls of slop.

Do it again, more salt, less time."

I tried it.

I'm not one for exaggeration but I honestly think I've never tasted better in my life.

Subtle, creamy, sensual, no wonder the Italians adore it so.

She never made it again after that, to the dismay of everyone who tasted it.

I watch her work for a moment, moving here and there with a calm surety.

She checks her mise en place, taking up a container of garnish and checking it for freshness.

Satisfied she puts it back in it's place before turning and sighing.

"I don't know how much more of this shit I can take Cian."

I have no idea what to say to her so I say nothing, giving her a sad smile.

"I almost preferred it when he was just sleazy."

"I didn't."

The Bully-Boys self chosen and preferred moniker is 'the big cheese', which we naturally corrected to the big sleaze after witnessing his treatment of any and every woman unlucky enough to cross paths with him.

In the beginning he had the waiting staff, primarily young women, to prey upon.

He would call for service minutes before a dish was ready to be served, allowing him time to 'sweet talk his girls' as he dubbed them.

He made crude advances and when he was rebuked he turned ugly, attacking their characters, belittling them, making appalling comments on their looks.

A true Jeckyll and Hyde was the Bully-Boy, play his game and you saw the face that he showed to management and the public. But cross him and you were marked irrevocably as an enemy until either you crumbled and left or you fought back, almost always to no effect.

He was slapped, they were fired.

He made excuses, the management deferred to him.

The whole sorry situation devolved until word got around and we found ourselves with a skeleton crew of serving staff.

Still he persisted. It came to a head one evening after dinner service.

Our Saucier, a wonderful Hungarian chef named Peter and myself were taking a smoke break before starting clean up. When we returned to the kitchen we found him in a corner of the kitchen with Maria, one of the serving staff.

His arm effectively trapping her in the corner, he was speaking low, directly into her ear with a look of hunger in his eyes. We entered uncertainly, but after seeing the look of discomfort on Maria's face we both moved towards him.

He turned, nonchalantly.

"You two have the night off, Maria and I will finish up together."

We hesitated.

"You can leave. Now."

Peter turned to leave but something stopped me.

"You okay Maria?" I queried.

"Of course she's fucking alright, we're just trying to have a little alone time. Now piss off."

I'm not a big guy, not even close, I'm a scrawny fucker but I'm tall.

The Bully-Boy's 15 stone if he's an ounce, most of it fat in fairness, but I don't like my chances if he decides to get rough with me. Still. I stand my ground.

"I want to leave. Please."

The Bully-Boy turns to her with venom dripping from his lips.

"You little trollop. Lead me on then, is that your game?

Try to curry favor with the chef? You tramp.

Get out of here then. In fact, don't bother coming back.

You're sacked. We don't need harlots like you working here.

Isn't that right Cian?"

It takes all my effort not to walk up and punch him straight in the nose.

"C'mon Maria, I'll walk you home."

The Bully-Boy laughs, a cacophony of malice.

"So that's how it is! I had no idea! I always thought you were sweet on little Cleo!"

Well, well, well, suppose that means she's fair game now!

Enjoy your night kids! Best be safe, no telling where she's been Cian!"

A tirade of abuse and innuendo follows us out.

At the mention of Cleo I stiffen but keep walking until we're outside the restaurant.

Maria bursts into tears. I walk her home dwelling on his words.

He has me now. Cleo and I are not, nor have we ever been, to the best of my knowledge, in love.

Romantically at least. He has no hold on me, not for lack of trying.

Abuse, punishments, degradation, threats, all this I can handle.

I can't abide him hurting someone else.

The clock strikes six, jarring me back to the present.

Cleo looks over at me and smiles, red rimmed eyes showing up the lies of her lips.

Entremetier

The clock strikes six, another shift. Soon he'll be here. The big sleaze.

I look over at Cian and smile. He smiles back.

It looks genuine, I have no idea how he does it. It physically hurts to keep faking but I don't know what he'd do if he knew.

I check my mise en place again, it's a compulsive action, just a distraction from my thoughts.

Can't believe I cried in front of him. Stupid! That's exactly what he wants.

I remember being stronger, I used to be the shoulder people cried on.

Funny, I never noticed we'd changed places. He was a wuss as a kid, he'd cry if he killed a fly.

I missed those years in between, missed him becoming a man I guess.

But there he is, much changed but much the same too.

Same gentle little boy... Gentleman he was when we were kids.

He's the only one the big sleaze can't seem to get to. I envy him.

I could handle the advances, the sly hand dropped to my ass, those ugly, lechers eyes following me around, even the belittlement. I know I'm a good chef, maybe better than him, that kind of playground bullying doesn't work on me.

But fuck. He has me now. He knows.

I'm happy for them, obviously, he needs someone in his life to look after him.

He'd smoke it away otherwise... Maria's a sweet girl. A little dim maybe and not terrible assertive but sweet. Fuck! Don't cry again, you're a grown woman, hold it together, he's a boy for christ sakes! How did he know they were together before I did though?

I guess that's really what hurts. That he didn't tell me.

That I had to find out from that creature.

He'll use it against me any chance he can now.

Twist the knife, over and over again.

Why couldn't I just play it cool, play dumb, do anything except cry!

God it's just like culinary school all over again.

Surrounded by idiots, all men, all so full of themselves and so ready to teach the little girl how to cook. The jeers. The condescension. At least they weren't spiteful. They didn't revel in it, it's something they don't even question, some societal thing. They think it's okay.

They didn't take pleasure from it, they just never learned better.

Ha! Until Final year! God that felt good. 19 Soufflés in a row, all flat as pancakes and out comes mine. Perfect. That changed their minds. Or the Béarnaise! Haha, all scrambled eggs but mine.

There was a queue outside my dorm for days, boys clamouring, begging, wheedling for me to show them how to make it. Just set the heat lower and wait. It's not rocket science!

I sigh at the memory.

"Ah! Love is but smoke raised by the fume of sighs! Come now darling Cleo, I'm back, no need for such sighing any longer!"

His voice is like an oil slick over pure water, the words of the immortal bard in the mouth of a lecher. There is no justice in this world.

Saucier

"Why do you do this to yourself? Why are you still here?"

The street lights are coming on, another dreary autumn evening drawing in. I wish I was home, fire roaring, little brother Prattling on about the newest video game, another he'll, no doubt, never finish, but holds his attention for now.

Except I can't go yet. Just two more months, maybe three and I'll have enough to pay back the mortgage on the old farmhouse. Finally stop my 'anya' worrying.

I exhale cigarette smoke into the cold air. Even the cigarettes taste crap here, worse than usual at least. A clock chimes six.

"Oh fuck."

I toss the butt and speed back up the stairs of the delivery entrance.

A quick breath to steel myself for the evening and I enter the kitchen.

No more than two steps taken.

"You Foreign fuck, they don't have watches in your backwater country? You're late. Again.

Dishes for you this evening I think, and a deep clean this weekend, maybe having your arms covered in grease will remind you that we value punctuality in this country."

I switch off listening after the initial tirade, but the Bully-Boy keeps going for a few minutes longer as I prep my station.

"Right. Specials, Chicken Supreme, side of wilted spinach with garlic and tarragon.

Thai Curry with Prawn, don't forget the bloody garnish this time yeah?

Surf and turf, incidentally, something you and I should talk about privately Cleo."

He winks at her, she betrays no reaction but I notice Cian stiffen.

"For dessert, Eton Mess, pretty apt for you lot as you do so love to destroy my beloved kitchen.

Starters, no change. Seven O'clock, table of twelve, seven-thirty, table of four.

Any questions?"

There's never any questions. This is far and away the best team I have ever been a part of.

With one glaring exception obviously. Cian and Cleo are incredibly talented, just a shame they get no recognition. I'm no slouch either but this asshole gets to me, makes me doubt myself.

I can deal with stress, return orders, disasters, hell even fires wouldn't phase me.

But this... I suppose there's no other word for it than racism, is hard to accept.

Cian has told me it's not normal, the casual way he spews it out, the severity of the insults, it shocks them too, but they don't have to deal with it. They are very supportive, I wouldn't be able to stay if

they left. Although I wouldn't blame them. Who could?

I didn't leave my country for this.

"Good! Hold the fort, I'm going for a smoke."

The mood of the kitchen lightens palpably as he leaves.

"So that's a half hour at least of peace, a little break from the tyranny of despots.

Fuck I hope he chokes on that cigarette."

Secretly, so do I, but I keep it to myself. I envy Cian, he never bows to the Bully-Boy, just stares him down until he loses interest, I feel worse for Cleo, it isn't easy being a woman in this industry under the best of circumstances, it's still kind of a boys club. But especially with a boss like this. My mind goes to a dark place, if the Bully-Boy was to choke on that cigarette, what would happen. Everyone moves up a step I suppose, Cian would be head, I'm Sous and Cleo gets my position, god that would be magnificent. Maybe we'd even get a Michelin! We could clean up this death trap he calls a kitchen, finally feel free to experiment, smile and laugh again without fear of being picked apart. A man has to have dreams. Without dreams we can only sleep and this place brings me only nightmares.

"You okay Peter?"

Cleo brings me out of my daydream, she's a perceptive woman, no mistake.

I feel myself blush.

"I was thinking of how amazing this place would be without him, if we ran it together."

A silence as they all lapse into a beautiful daydream.

Coughing and spluttering from the stairwell signal the Bully-Boys return.

He enters with the grace of a wounded animal, angry and strained.

"Change of plans. VIP guests tonight, a visiting dignitary and his entourage from some Asian shithole, Korea maybe, not sure.

Nine o'clock, table of eight. The works. We're closing shop so they have privacy, special request.

First person who fucks up tonight is a dead man, capiche?"

We all nod, this is not overly unusual, we get VIPs from time to time.

Say what you will about the Bully-Boy, he can cook.

But to close the restaurant for a table of eight is unheard of. They must be a big deal.

I look at Cian, he's deep in thought, Cleo seems distracted.

"One other thing. Cian, round half eight I need you to go round to Grace's fishmonger.

This fucker's asked for Fugu, must have a death wish and a lot of cash.

She'll have it ready for you, you just have to pick it up so there's no way you can possibly fuck that up, but so help me, if you do... Anyway, we'll do the plebs who've already booked then you jokers get an hour break, do whatever you want, just be back here before it all kicks off.

"Alright? Alright. Let's do this. You, Hunk! Where's my fucking demi-glace?"

I point to a small pot simmering on the stove and pray that some day soon I will be free of this awful place.

Brigade

In a small bar across the street from their restaurant prison sit Cleo, Peter and Cian.

Peter is nursing a large vodka and a small burn on his hand.

"Can't believe he handed me off a hot pan without a warning. Asshole."

Cian finishes a pint of stout and signals the barman for another.

"Something's up with him. He's not all there today. These guests must be a big deal."

His drink arrives, they are lost in their own separate thoughts.

Cleo is swirling ice cubes around with a straw.

"Visiting Korean dignitaries, I'd be nervous too. Fugu isn't easy to prepare. Most of its internal organs are poisonous, it's a neurotoxin similar to sarin gas. Eat too much or eat the wrong part and you'll end up unable to breath as your body shuts down. The trick is to eat just enough to begin to feel the effects of the toxin, something close to euphoria from what I've read.'

Peter is staring at her, mouth open.

"Why do you stay here Cleo? My god someone with your kind of training and learning should be running their own restaurant, not being bludgeoned by that ogre!"

Cleo's cheeks erupt in a blush of beetroot and she drops her eyes to her glass.

"It's not so simple. It's a man's world and the only way to get recognition is to serve your time. Make your way up the ranks, gain recognition and strike out on your own once you've made a stir. That ogre has the whole world fooled. But he did the leg work first too, I hear he started out bussing tables before he got noticed by some big shot who took him under his wing.

That doesn't happen if you're a woman. If you want to get taken under someone's wing you have to be prepared to be taken under their sheets too..."

An awkward silence broken by ice cubes clinking against glass with renewed vigor.

"Well, for what it's worth, you are, without doubt, the most talented cook I have ever worked with."

Cian pipes up, "Hear, hear!" They raise their glasses to her solemnly.

"My god, are you two drunk already?... But thank you, both. It means alot.

I don't think I'd be able to face another day in that place if it weren't for you."

They clink glasses.

"What are friends for?" Cian smiles at her. She returns it, hollowly, a gesture bereft of it's meaning from years of misuse. Peter observes sadly and sighs to himself.

"I hate that man. I know it's wrong to hate and that it makes me less of a person but I can't help myself. I have often hoped..."

Cian and Cleo wait for him to finish but he seems almost to be speaking to himself.

"I know how you feel..." Cian takes a long swallow before continuing.

"You wish the worst on him. Then you feel terrible for wishing that on anyone.

He makes me feel less human just by proximity.

When I first started working here he told me that his previous Sous had tried to poison him.

I was shocked. Appalled honestly. This was before I got to know him.

He has a very serious peanut allergy. I don't know what he did to the poor guy to have it come to...

Well, to murder. But god help me if I don't understand him.

I've thought about it. How easy it would be. Just pop some peanuts into his meal and watch him go.

Right there on the kitchen floor, choking to death. I've had dreams about it, beautiful, visceral dreams. When I wake up I'm ashamed and I don't know who to blame, myself for having these thoughts, him, for being the root and cause of them, the management for consistently looking the other way..." He punctuates these last words with a thud of his fist on the table.

"You know..." Peter offers up coyly "they sell peanuts at the bar?"

The all chuckle briefly. "I guess it could be worse. It's better than being unemployed."

Peter guffaws "Not by much!"

Cleo drains her glass. "We have each other. Despite everything else we have that.

He's tried to get me alone you know. He told me you were a serial womaniser and that I should stay clear of you." She raises an eyebrow at Peter, he sits dumbfounded, glass halfway to his mouth.

"Two minutes of conversation proved that to be wrong!"

Cian bursts into laughter, clapping Peter on the back. "Oh c'mon, Peter's got plenty of charm! He could have any woman he wanted, I'm sure, it's just he's a gentleman, and a shy one at that!"

Peter looks abashed, bordering on uncomfortable.

Cleo looks at them both and laughs to herself. "God you're blind sometimes you know that?"

They both look at her, Peter apprehensive, Cian in utter confusion.

"You know? But How? For how long?" Peter clutches his glass in anticipation.

"Day one. From your ringtone, tiny dancer, great song, right down to your very stylish and impeccably polished leather shoes! Now don't look at me like that, it's not my fault you conform to all the stereotypes!"

Cian still looks confused.

Peter lets out a long held breath. "Actually, it's kind of a relief. Nobody back home knows. It's difficult there to be open about these things. My country can be a dangerously intolerant place..."

Realisation dawns on Cian. "You're gay!"

Peter sheepishly nods affirmative. Cleo rolls her eyes.

"God that explains so much! But you don't need to hide that sort of thing, especially not from your friends! Maybe from the big sleaze, though I doubt gay bashing is any worse than the slurs he already throws at you." His face darkens.

"Thank you. Really, your acceptance means more than you know." Peter raises his glass to them and they clink once more.

"Well isn't this just a delightful little love in you've got going on here! Barkeep, double whiskey and another round for my underlings here!"

Peter turns white as a sheet, Cleo clenches her teeth as Cian closes his eyes in disbelief.

They turn in their stools to face the architect of their unhappiness.

The Bully-Boy resplendent, in uncharacteristically jovial mode.

He pulls up a chair, forcing them to make space for them, and puts his arm lazily on Cleo's shoulder.

She shudders. If he notices, he does not care.

Their drinks arrive.

"Cheers."

They clink. The Bully-Boy looks from face to face, nobody meets his gaze.

"Why such damp spirits? Tonight is a big night for us. For me mostly, but no doubt you'll share in its glow. Our guest happens to be the Korean Foreign Minister, here on an errand of state.

Naturally he chose the most prestigious restaurant in town in which to dine.

This is good. This is very good. Barring any fuck ups from you lot we're looking at a lot of business after tonight. A guest of this magnitude doesn't come this way often and his influence is quite far ranging. Yes, this is very good!"

He sips his whiskey, the others sit silently, praying for his departure. He looks around again, his gaze lingering on Cleo.

He allows his arm to brush down the length of her arm as he removes it and leans towards them.

"Look. I get it. You don't like me. Truth be told I'm not fond of any of you either.

But this is bigger than you know. This could be the start of my road to a Michelin star, dependant on the verdict from our guests. I need you all to focus. It's eight guests. 3 courses and Fugu for the minister, which I will be preparing personally."

At this Cleo looks up.

"Finally, a reaction. What is it? Surprised? Let me guess. You thought you'd be preparing the Fugu?"

Cleo colors slightly before looking him in the eye.

"It's a very difficult dish to prepare, whether simply as sashimi or..."

He cuts her off.

"Don't you dare talk down to me. I know all about your culinary background, your training and experience. But quite frankly I would never, in a million years, trust you with a dish like that.

Especially for a guest of that station. Hell I wouldn't trust you to sear a steak for a minister!

No. You're on deserts, at least there you won't fuck up. Bake them a cake or something.

In one aspect of the kitchen and one only, I will admit women are better. Baking.

So bake them up something tasty and let me handle the fish. Fucking hell, you actually thought I was going to let you prepare it?" He dissolves into gales of laughter, followed by coughing, spraying spittle across the bar.

Cian fumes silently, Peter is trying to avoid attention while Cleo seems to have shrunk into herself, mortally insulted and afraid of her own retort.

The Bully-Boy finishes his whiskey.

"Be back in the restaurant in half an hour. Don't forget the fucking fish."

He heaves himself out of the chair and looks them over once more.

"Mark my words. If any one of you fucks this up for me. I will personally ensure that you never work in this industry again. I will ruin you utterly. Bring your A game or don't bother turning up."

The three are left in grim silence. Cian puts a hand over Cleos.

Bully-Boy

Back in his kitchen the king surveys his kingdom.
He paces too and fro, sweat upon his brow and ill at ease.
He inspects each station, checks his utensils and continually checks the clock.
"You can do this. It's just a fish. You can do this.
This is the big show. Twenty-five years leading up to this.
Composed, calm, charming, in control. You are in control. You can do this."
He resumes his pacing, anxiously checking the clock midstride.
"Where the fuck are those idiots?"
He hears the delivery door click and straightens from his meandering, smoothing back his hair and
leaning casually on a counter.
Cleo and Peter enter.
"Good, you're here. Cleo, desserts. Peter, if you're mise is ready to go you can busy yourself with
entrées. Look sharp."
They move to their appointed tasks.
A waitress enters. She hesitates before speaking.
"Excuse me? The guests have arrived."
The Bully-Boy barely acknowledges her.
"Good. Let's rock and roll peons! Where the fuck is that fish?..."
The waitress leaves, rolling her eyes as Cian arrives with a parcel wrapped in brown paper.
"Excellent, give it here, quick now, this requires a delicate touch."
He snatches the parcel away and places it on a pre prepared cutting board.
"Right. Look alive. Starters should be coming in any minute, get to your station.
Let's show these fucking Gooks what a real meal tastes like!"
No sooner have these words left his mouth than the young waitress enters again.
"The minister wants to meet the team!"
Arriving on her heels are the restaurant manager and a dignified, older gentleman.
Looking over his glasses he surveys them each in turn.
"Good evening, gracious hosts. I look forward to sampling your culinary delights.
I have not tasted Fugu since my childhood when my grandmother, as a rare treat,
once prepared it as a soup."
He is silent once more, gazing at them expectantly. The trio keep their heads down, afraid to speak
despite their guests genial disposition.
"Come now, why so modest? I have never seen a more retiring kitchen crew! I thought you were
brash and bold and confident like your chef here!"
The trio look at each other sheepishly before meeting the eyes of the minister.
"Much better! Proud faces indeed, and here, a beautiful flower blooming in the most unlikely of
places! I will hold you no longer, I look forward to my meal."
He turns and leaves leisurely.
Cleo is vivid crimson. "I didn't expect him to be so charming."
The Bully-Boy snorts. "I didn't expect him to be blind, there's only weeds in this kitchen, now back
to work!"

Amuse-Bouche

A hush lies over the kitchen.
Cleo, Peter and Cian are talking quietly at one end.
Deserts have been pre-prepared and the mains delivered to table.
"Well fucking done you lot. Not a single slip-up. See what this fucker thinks of my Fugu Hire-zake.

Bet they never taught you that in your fancy school, eh Cleo? Some things you can't learn from an institution or a book, some things you have to learn from good old fashioned experience.

I spent some time in Osaka, many moons ago, with a delightfully spirited Japanese wench. A divinely beautiful Baishun, something like a Geisha. My god the things she could do with her mouth I tell you she made me weep. Once she took me to a bath house and we almost got kicked out. She took the soap and began to...

He is cut off by a commotion in the dining area.

"What the fuck now? Damn Gooks can't handle their beer no doubt..."

The manager arrives flushed and hysterical.

"What the fuck did you do to the fish?!"

Shock rules the kitchen momentarily before the Bully-Boy regains his composure.

"What the fuck do you mean? Nothing! What's happened?"

The manager is livid, falling over his words.

"He's just collapsed! Get out here and do something! Quick! I'll call an ambulance!"

The Bully-Boy pales then rapidly exits the kitchen.

Voces in varying degrees of panic are heard from the dining room, then the scuffle of seats, crashing and raise voices.

Cleo claws at Cian's shoulder.

"No fucking way. He's poisoned the foreign minister."

The kitchen holds its breath as the sounds of chaos fade.

The Bully-Boy enters, haggard looking and thoroughly shaken.

He looks at the trio, lost for words.

Cleo slowly shakes her head.

Bully-Boy opens his mouth, frothing with venom. His eyes bulge as he prepares a tirade.

A well dressed, Asian gentleman enters. He addresses the Bully-Boy directly.

"We were initially unsure about dining in this establishment tonight, until we heard that one of your staff had trained at the vaunted L'Academie de Cuisine.

From what I understand, some issue of pride overcame common sense and an inexperienced chef prepared our ministers meal. This pride may cause his death and if so, blame will be levelled squarely at the one who prepared the meal. I have no doubt that this is the end of your career and, most likely, this establishment.

In all other respects, our meal was exquisite, my compliments to your team. We will be in touch.

Good night."

He leaves. Cleo is first to react.

"You've killed a minister."

The Bully-Boy, without looking at them, croaks harshly.

"Get out.

The trio look at each other in bewilderment.

"Get out! Now!"

A roar from the Bully-Boy and they scurry out of the kitchen.

Slowly, steadily, he sinks to the floor and weeps, bitterly.