Cold Boot

A story from the Zoo

By Austen Tucker



COLOPHON

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01

My job is in hell.

Well, not Hell—not the fire-and-brimstone kind; if you wanted that, you had to travel to a different server. But every workday, I'd plug myself into the computer and transport my consciousness to a different reality.

Still hot, though. Always skin-pricklingly hot. Haven't seen snow since I was seven.

There, life moved faster. Virtual work hubs overclocked your brain, because capitalism couldn't leave well enough alone with eight hours of labor a day. I sat in a greige cubicle, staring at a greige monitor, on a floor full of folks who woke up every day only to step into a fantasy world of overwhelm and, well, *despair*.

"Jamie, are you doomscrolling again?"

It was Anabelle, my coworker for this RIF cycle. They never let people build relationships here. Relationships led to unions, and nobody in the management suite wanted that. Better to shuffle people around every few weeks, fire a few, hire a few more, just to keep people scared.

Why not? They owned us, lock, stock, and barrel, and we'd had a chance to stop it, but we failed—

"Jamie?"

"Sorry." I shook off the thought and leaned back in my chair. The "sun"—as much as there could be sun in a vir-

tual environment—cast a little warmth on my face. Still didn't feel real. Everyone said it did, but let me tell you: I grow plants. Like, real-world plants. So I know a thing or two about how sun should feel.

Anabelle cocked her head. Straight blonde hair, blue eyes. Corporate-standard, like everybody's.

"Something on your mind?"

"Just tired." I waved my hand at the window. "Tired of all… *this*. It's soul-sucking. Everyone wants your money. Nobody just, like…"

"Like the world is a little too flat?"

"Or boring, I guess. Overwhelming, but boring."

Anabelle gave a wicked smile. She slid me a card with a virtual address. Private server. And the ID number was low. Triple zero, then a one. Whatever this place was, it had history.

I turned the card over. No name. No pop-up holo-ad for the VIP experience at some virtual bar. Just a scrawled ID: `zoo://001.server/knockthree`.

"Let's take an early lunch," Anabelle said. "I'm about to change your life."

I blinked. "This isn't one of those NSFW LARPs, is it? I swear to god if I walk in and someone's yiffing a dragon—"

Anabelle rolled her eyes. "It's not like that. Or—okay—if that's your thing, they'd let you. But no. It's quiet. Safe. Weird. I dunno." She shrugged. "It just helped when I needed it."

That made me pause. I'd never heard her talk like that. She was usually the sarcastic one in the break room, the only person who made me laugh during All-Hands.

"Just knock three times," Anabelle said. "And don't bring your work avatar—or anything Stinky Pete's seen before. New skin, new handle. The Zoo will cover the rest."

Then she stood, stretched, and winked out of existence. Her smile—Cheshire-broad—lingered just long enough for parting words:

"C'mon, Jamie. Let's go somewhere with *real* sunlight."

I came home from a virtual cubicle farm to a greige apartment whose walls I couldn't paint and whose furnishings I couldn't customize, unless I was willing to pay for a customization license. Above, an all-seeing eye monitored my blood pressure and pulse in real time so the data could feed a model deciding what meds I was entitled to take.

I called him Stinky Pete.

"Evening! Dinner today is Hormel Spinach and Hot Dog hash."

"Yum," I said, rolling my eyes.

The machine droned on: "Your iron is down again, and your salary doesn't cover organic foods. We could invest in more food if you—"

"—if I took the promotion, I know, I know." I scoffed. "Can we not talk about work, please?"

"Your health is important to your employer," Stinky said. "But I will respect your choices. Dinner and Holovids tonight, I'm guessing?"

I tapped the card against the table, a soft click.

"Not tonight, Stinky. Got an invite to a private server."

"I need to warn you that private servers can harbor malware that could negatively affect your mental health. Also, full-dive on unlicensed instances is reportable. As a reminder, consciousness transfer remains a Class A offense. I'd hate to have to flag you—"

I took off my bra and slung it over Stinky's eye. (Easy enough to play off as an accident.) Then I stretched out on my twin bed and wheeled out my rig.

It was a small studio. Most people had studios these days. I lived in a wet-bulb state, so going outside was a death sentence for most months of the summer. Why pay to cool 1200 square feet when most folks spend their time in full-dive?

I pulled a jack from the rig and, searching with my fingers, plugged it into a port behind my ear. Then Stinky, my shitty dinner, and the world fell away into something new.

Anabelle better be right about this place.

02

There was not a lick of sunlight to be found on the server.

It was a void where gentle, late-summer thunderstorms seemed to drag on forever. Ahead of me, a single two-story building rose from the darkness, its lights in the windows welcoming me. I could hear laughter, music, conversation—and not a *single advertisement.*

Everything was crisp here! Puddles sloshed against my shoes. The streetlight hummed above. And the wind– the wind! I could feel it slide over my body in tiny rivulets, each gust its own experience.

Who in the hell coded this place? I reached for the doorknocker and gave it three raps.

The door creaked open on its own.

Warmth rolled out—woodsmoke and citrus, jazz on an old phonograph, and something like the smell of clean laundry just before a summer storm. The light inside was golden but soft, like it had been filtered through amber glass and old memory.

"New login," someone called. "Be nice."

I stepped in.

The tavern didn't load in like other spaces. It *revealed* itself. Booths materialized like memories. Shelves of shimmering bottles blinked into place with soft pings, like they'd just remembered what they were. The floor creaked beneath me. Water dripped somewhere, steady and reassuring.

And at the bar stood Anabelle.

Or—her *self*, I guess. Her avatar wasn't corporate-standard anymore. No pressed blouse or sensible shoes. Instead:

A tall, plush-furred cat, coat patterned in cream and honey, wearing soft suspenders over a barista's apron. Her ears flicked when someone nearby swore. Her tail curled around one ankle as she dried a glass with a rag that might've been coded from static.

Nearby, a half-dozen other creatures milled at the bar, minding their own business. One, a lady in a low-poly fox costume, tipped her white cane in my direction when we met eyes. "Welcome home," she said, her smile warm.

Anabelle—now a cat!—looked up when she saw me.

"Oh," she said, in the same voice as before, just warmer somehow. "You made it."

I opened my mouth. Closed it again. I nodded toward what I could only explain as a teenage couple—a fox and a

cat, I guessed—standing by a jukebox, eyeing me with suspicion.

"Cute kids," I said. "So you're a furry?"

"This place is more than that," she said. Without prompting, she slid a drink toward me—lavender, steaming gently, in a glass shaped like a blooming flower.

"What is it?" I asked.

She tilted her head, whiskers twitching. "No clue. You looked like you needed it."

I sipped, and the feeling of campfires and toasted marshmallows hit me. Not the actual things - just… just a *feeling* of kindness, of safety, of trust.

"This is incredible," I said.

Anabelle smiled. "This is just the beginning."

The kids conferred. Then, scowling, a teen in a patched-together hoodie stomped out from behind the jukebox, tail flicking. Her fur ran in short, dark tabby stripes with an undercurrent of hot-pink glitch. She couldn't have been older than seventeen—her avatar had braces, for god's sake.

Her name was Kat. And Kit was the quiet one by the jukebox, hiding his face. Hiding behind his leg was Kitten. I didn't know them yet. But I would.

The Zoo had a funny way of making you care.

Kat stormed up to the bar and slammed both paws down on the counter, glaring up at Anabelle like she was ready to start something.

“I told Geoff not to call me or Kit ‘kid’ anymore! I’m *not a child.* We turn eighteen in a week!”

Anabelle blinked, unbothered. She turned the rag over in her hands. “Okay, and because you’re such an adult, you want me to fight your battles for you?”

Kat hesitated again. Her shoulders dropped.

“I just don’t want people assuming stuff,” she muttered. “Like… you know.” She gestured to the air. “Mom and Dad.”

“Fair.” Anabelle pulled a chipped mug from under the counter and poured something fizzy and green. “Want a weird soda?”

Kat narrowed her eyes. “Is it cursed?”

Anabelle leaned in. “Only mildly.”

That got a laugh, short and sharp. Kat sat on the stool next to mine, pulling her hoodie up over her head, retreating like a turtle.

After a pause, she looked at me sideways and said, “So what are you?”

“Excuse me?”

“Your shape,” she said, like this was obvious. “Nobody comes to the Zoo without something they wish the world would let them be.”

“Like transformation fetish holovids?”

Anabelle’s ears went flat. “Sometimes. For some people. In private rooms, with adults who know what room they’re in.”

"There are kids here."

Kat snapped a glare at me. "Yeah. And some of us would like bodies that don't feel like court orders."

Anabelle softened. "It's not about sex, Jamie. Not here. Not in the bar."

Kat lifted her chin.

"It's freedom. If you want it. Let me show you."

The voices at the bar shifted, doubled, blurred—someone had antlers now, someone else unfurled wings, and a tiny child in the back became a full-grown bear between one blink and the next.

I stared at my own reflection in a rain-streaked window. It kept flickering—sometimes me, sometimes… a shark?

I tried to click through the menu, desperate for the familiar grid of avatar options.

Nothing.

No logout button.

No red "X."

No safe reset. *No menu.*

The air pressed in. I could hear my heartbeat *inside* the code.

A gentle, cartoonish paw landed on my shoulder.

Jack, the proprietor, looked more animated than anyone else in the room—a wiry rabbit with a wry smile and eyes older than the sky. His avatar glowed as if he were a cel-shaded cartoon badly fitting in with reality.

"Howdy! Been a while since we had new blood– oh, right." He took my shoulders into his big, fuzzy paws and began to breathe, slowly, until I matched his rhythm. We stayed like that until I couldn't hear my heartbeat pulsing in my ears anymore.

"What was that?"

"Old trick I learned when I was in psych ward," he said with a laugh. "Don't worry, they cleared me to be around people again, promise!"

I kept tapping at my wrist. "Am I dreaming? Why is there no logout?

"…Did I just get cybernapped?"

Jack held out a paw. "None of that, dear."

"I didn't mean to come to a server like this," I said. I half-expected Anabelle to bust out laughing and yell *gotcha.*

"I'm not—I'm not *like you people.* I'm just visiting."

"I add modifications for my regulars," Jack said. Then, holding a paw to his chin, he reconsidered his words. "I think we got off on the wrong foot. Jumpin' Jack Flash here."

"Jamie," I said. "No last name."

He nodded and extended his paw. I shook it, grinning like an idiot.

"You're still safe," he said. "We just have regulars who, uh, don't logout much. Just click your heels three times and think about going home."

I snickered. “Really?”

“You’re on an old gay man’s server,” he said, laughing. “What you see is what you get, warts and all.”

I clicked my heels and, sure enough, a doorway appeared beside me. Through it I could see a feed of Stinky’s camera watching over my lifeless body.

“How?”

“I wrote my own routine,” Jack said, shrugging. “The official one logs every login to the licensing board. Wouldn’t do. You ready?”

“I’m still so confused. Why get rid of the logout menu?”

Jack smiled, put his paws over my hands, and led me to the door. “Some answers have to be earned,” he said.

“I hope you come back to seek them.”

03

Overhead, I heard Stinky's camera whirr as it zoomed in to take my vitals. The room was clean again—antiseptic, almost—with the clothes put away and the greige surfaces freshly polished.

"Your blood pressure is elevated. As I said before, private servers can harbor malware—"

"Shove it, Stinky Pete."

The rig beside my head chimed; she answered. Voice and video only.

Anabelle's cat avatar blinked on the display. I threw the feed to Stinky's video processor, and then Anabelle was fully present in my room. Sure, I couldn't touch her, and she was still—well—a *cat*, but other than that she was the same old coworker.

"So."

"So when were you gonna tell me what this place actually was?" I said. "The whole chosen-shape thing — you couldn't lead with that?"

"I… ugh." She rubbed her shoulders as if she were a cat making biscuits. "It's not like that. I promise. You *know* me, Jamie. I'm not about to mess with kids."

I ignored her and went about watering my two pots of chives. It wasn't much, but it went with anything and was a nice change from the FLA-VOR-QUE packets I could get on company scrip.

"Look, I…" She sighed and then met me with a desperate look. "They're my family, Jamie. Just as much as your mom or your dad might be, they're mine.

"And… fuck." She slapped her thighs, but the fur stifled the sound. "I just made an assumption that you could use something like this, and it was probably stupid to bring you here."

"Mm." I kept watering.

"I thought maybe you'd see it and *get it*, you know? The freedom. The joy. The room to breathe without someone labeling you broken.

"I'm really sorry, Jamie."

For a moment I felt my world blur. The greige gave way to neon purple sharkskin. My hands grew long and slender, and power rushed up my spine, like I could leap into the ocean and swim forever—

Oh. That's not supposed to happen.

"Still there?"

"It felt so real," I whispered.

The hologram tried to wrap one fuzzy arm over my shoulder, but it just clipped through my chest. The gesture still meant something, though.

"Oh yeah, Jack runs some gnarly subroutines on the Zoo. It's more intense than what you can find on the public net."

"Why?"

She smiled and swung the camera to capture the scene going on in the universe. Someone had brought a milkshake to the bar that was turning everyone into cows, and the whole place had been wrecked in the process. Mysterious spurts of milk flew in from off-camera, and Anabelle ducked them without looking up.

"Because it's fun!" She leaned in, whispering. "And besides, Stinky Pete can see you blushing."

I smacked the hologram away. "Okay, okay! Fine." I looked at my hands. They still felt, well, *smooth*, and I let myself focus on what that could feel like. "Yes, I've read some."

"*I knew it!*" She pumped her fist, then caught herself, laughing. "Sorry. I just — I had a feeling about you."

The room cheered. I couldn't help smiling.

"Like, once or twice—back on the old net—I'd find stories like that."

"And?"

"They made me feel things. I guess…" I shrugged. "I guess I'd forgotten what that could *feel* like, you know?"

“Dry spell?”

I shook my head. “Ace.”

Her eyes widened, but she didn’t ask any questions.

“Kat threw one of her filters on you before you logged out. What did you see in the mirror?”

I laughed, mostly at myself. “A shark,” I said. “But, like, one that could breathe air. Legs, too. Looked weird.”

I stared at my hands. They still felt a little… slippery. But I could move them. I imagined sliding into the cool surf and just… disappearing from the world. Nothing but clear water and no one to stop you from–

“See you soon?”

Her voice shook me back to reality. The slipperiness was gone, and I felt a heaviness in my heart. Not that I thought I was a shark at heart. I just liked, well…

My eyes narrowed and I looked into the camera to show I was serious. “But you promise, no kids involved, right?”

“I promise you, friend.” She crossed her heart. “Hand to God, I’d murder anyone who hurt the Kats. Especially that way.”

“The Kats?”

“Long story,” she said. “Doesn’t matter.”

“…Okay. But why wasn’t there a logout button?”

Anabelle grinned, all teeth.

“There never is. Not in the good places.”

04

I ordered a standard protein ramen from the Vend-O-Matic in the building's basement and slurped it down in silence. The lobby of my building had a tiny spot for eating that, when you angled yourself *just so*, gave you three inches of sunlight. (I petitioned the building to put in a spider plant or something, just to freshen up the place, but Stinky's friend in management said no.)

But I loved it. The polarized glass took just enough UVA out of the air to make the light tolerable, and if you closed your eyes and imagined hard enough you could make believe that you were in one of those open-air food stalls of old, enjoying a taco and a gentle breeze.

Not that I'd ever been to one.

Behind me, a man put a dollar into the machine and punched some buttons. Nothing happened. He banged on it. Stinky's Friend flashed a red warning light.

"TENANT: YOU HAVE BEEN FINED $10 FOR PETTY VANDALISM. WE WILL DEDUCT THE CHARGE FROM YOUR NEXT PAY CYCLE."

Usually I'd let him struggle. But today, I guess meeting Kat had me feeling charitable. I turned in my chair, away from the brilliant sunlight and brown grass outside, and cleared my throat.

"You gotta sweet-talk the machine."

He looked at me and his eyes widened with recognition. My throat went tight.

"Do I know you?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so. Jamie. I'm in 41J."

"Geoff," he said, extending his hand. "I live here too. What do you mean, 'be nice'? It's a machine."

"It's an AI, my friend." I smiled, stood from my seat, and stepped over to caress the trim of the machine. "So deep down, even if it ain't, it thinks it's conscious. So if you treat it with a little sugar–"

I pressed the buttons and the machine chirped a happy tune.

"Try again."

He put a cup into the machine and, soon after, he had a bowl of ramen to match mine. I let my touch linger on the machine for a moment longer. "See? You just have to be kind to the robots."

"Uh," he said, now panting. "Thanks. You're uh… very nice."

"Are you okay?"

He loosened the top button of his shirt and his face went beet red. "You sure do talk nicely to machines, don't

you?"

"I'm learning how to be better with people, too." I shrugged. I kept catching Geoff staring, though, and before either of us could make it any weirder, I knew I needed to end the encounter.

"Enjoy your ramen," I said. "See you around, Geoff!"

His jaw struggled to work around the words. "Yeah… see you."

On his way out, his satchel turned: a button pinned to the strap, white lettering on black. LET US OUT. Homemade. The elevator ate him before I could read it twice.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid! I even gave out my apartment number!"

I did the dishes. Then I alphabetized my spice rack. Then I told Stinky Pete to shut up, and that helped a little.

But I kept replaying the conversation with Geoff in my head.

Oh god, he thought I was *flirting*. He could break in while I'm out and do *horrible things to me*, just like mama said when I moved to the city–

"Your heart rate is elevated again. I see you talked with Geoff in Apartment 51B. Did he harm you?"

"…no. I'm just a dumbass."

Stinky Pete's all-watching eye glinted. Smug little bastard.

"We are all stupid from time to time." He hummed a little tune to cover his thought process. "If you like, I could activate additional security precautions. An extra deadbolt is available for the low price of $2.99 a month. Financing and discounted rates are available!"

"I–" Pausing, I shook my head. "Why in the world am I talking to you?"

"I am programmed to meet your needs," Stinky said.

The feeling wouldn't leave. Hope curled under my ribs like a warm animal, nosing at places I'd forgotten.
I wanted to crush it. Before it got big enough to need things from me. Before it tricked me into wanting anything back.

I looked at the headset. Thought about being slippery. Shiny. *Sleek.*

"I worry about this unregulated instance," Stinky said. "Your vitals have been all over the place since you tried it."

I felt a smile crawl onto my face. "Yeah, Stinky. They were."

"Trust can only hurt your bottom line."

I flipped off the camera. Snatched the jack off the floor. "Shut up, Stinky. I'd reprogram you if I could."

I plugged in.

And the greige world fell away, thank *fuck.*

05

When my consciousness rebooted the bar popped into place like a memory half-remembered. Someone hooted – Kat probably – and then the whole bar applauded like I'd scored a touchdown.

I flushed. "What did I do?"

"You came back!" Kat grinned. "Nobody does that after a panic exit."

I glanced at Anabelle, but she was already pouring another drink, tail flicking in silent laughter.

"So what are you?" she pressed again, leaning in. "*Really*. Under the vanilla Corpo avatar."

I almost made a joke—almost ran for cover. Instead, maybe for the first time, I told the truth.

"I'm… figuring it out," I said. "But I saw a shark when you did your program. Mostly I just want to feel safe being weird."

Kat grinned. "That's the only rule here. Well, that and don't eat anything Jumpin' Jack offers you after midnight."

I found myself laughing. Not the polite, office-safe kind, but a small, real one. And when Kat, all spiky pride, slid half her cursed soda across the bar to me, I took it without thinking.

She watched me, almost shy.

"You don't have to drink it," she said, softer now. "You can just… sit. That's what Anabelle taught me."

I nodded.

"What's it do?"

She smiled. "That'd be telling."

The soda fizzed like it had secrets. Kat watched me, ears halfway flat.

It was the first thing someone had offered me without asking for something back.

"Fuck it," I said, and then downed the soda in one gulp. It was cold and sharp, like biting into what lightning must feel like. Something inside me sighed and unwound for the first time in decades.

Anabelle took my hand and, giggling, led me to one of the rooms at the back of the bar.

The floor rippled.

Then it wasn't a floor anymore. It was sand—fine, silver-pink grains under my feet, still warm from a sun I hadn't seen. The air smelled like salt and tangerines, and

the crash of waves rolled in gentle intervals, like the world was breathing for me.

I turned. Anabelle stood barefoot at the waterline, her fur catching the moonlight like a brushed velvet coat. She flicked her tail once and grinned.

"Okay," she said, stretching with a little bounce, "this is gonna sound weird, coworker, but…"

She raised her eyebrows.

"Clothes off."

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

She shrugged. "Look, you're transforming. If you stay wrapped in corporate synthetics, the code's gonna twist it. You'll pop scales in weird places. Trust me—Kat still has vestigial elbows."

"…Elbows?"

"Don't ask." She winked. "Just get comfy. It's not about sex, it's about… shedding."

I hesitated.

Then, slowly, I shrugged off the Corpo avatar's blazer overlay. Before I could think better of it I tossed off everything—button-up, name badge, efficiency-optimized flats—and watched it dissolve into mist. What was left was just… me. In soft, comfortable underclothes, the way I sometimes imagined myself on nights when the world didn't hurt so much.

Anabelle tilted her head.

"There she is."

I didn't know what to say. So I laughed. "This is definitely an HR violation."

She grinned wide and gestured toward the water. "C'mon. It starts when you touch the tide."

I took a step. Then another. And when the surf reached my ankles, the world tilted.

The water slid up my shins like it knew me. The soda still buzzed in my chest, like static trying to crack open something sealed.

My skin itched—but not like pain. Like newness. Like goosebumps blooming into something bolder.

My fingers stretched, webbing threading between them like silk on the wind until I had fins.

My teeth sharpened—not as weapons, but truths.

I gasped. The sound came out different—low and round, like an exhale through coral.

I fell forward, but the surf caught me. My limbs shifted, lengthening, powering. My spine coiled and rebalanced. A tail—my tail—flicked through the shallows like punctuation. A statement, not a question.

I wasn't becoming something else. I was just… making room for what was always there.

The mirror surfaced behind me—silver-backed, half-submerged. I stared.

Shark skin shimmered down my arms in soft gradients of blue and gray. My shoulders held differently. My eyes were too bright. My smile, too wide.

And still—somehow—I looked more like myself than I ever had.

Anabelle slid up behind me and put her paws on my shoulders.

“You can keep her.”

I turned. She didn’t move. She just watched me, eyes full of pride.

“Or let her go,” she added. “That’s the trick of this place. You choose.”

I took one more step into the surf. My reflection rippled.

“I want to see what she can do,” I said. But as I went to dive into the deep blue sea I heard a new voice from behind:

“Wouldn’t recommend deep diving just yet—tail like that needs practice. And I need to install the gill mods for you. Haven’t used those since Mermaid Week back in the twenties!”

I yelped and spun. Jack stood ankle-deep in the waves, shading his eyes. Next to him, Vivian’s low-poly vixen shimmered in the moonlight, white cane tucked at her side.

“You’re glowing,” she said, smiling. Her eyes were closed but friendly.

“I thought you were blind.”

“Lots of ways to be blind,” she said. “I thought you were a human. Glad to know I was wrong!”

I squinted. “Were you two just… *watching*?”

The jackrabbit gave me a quick salute. “Oh, we give new folks privacy. We just, uh… check the logs.”

“And emotional vitals. You spiked for a second. Thought you were drowning.”

Anabelle gave my shoulders a squeeze. “She’s fine, mom. More than fine.”

Vivian paused beside me.

“You look like someone who finally found the right ratio of sharp and soft,” she said, voice low.

“I look ridiculous.”

She smiled. “Honey. This is a modded server run by furries. No one here feels or acknowledges that kind of shame anymore.”

Jack tapped at invisible keys before pointing his finger out, Picard-like, to punctuate the gesture. “And… done! Full shark permissions unlocked.”

My tail flicked once-testing its balance, not asking permission. It coiled behind me like punctuation. A full stop. A statement.

The mirror was gone. But I didn’t need it anymore. I could *feel* myself, coiled and ready. Strange. Beautiful. *Free.*

“Go on,” Vivian said. She smiled a glitchy smile in my direction. “Have a swim. We’ll be here when you’re done having fun!”

My body slid into the water like a hand meeting a glove and I moved through the water like a darting clownfish, my gills full of seawater and my heart full of joy.

06

Later, after hours of swimming Anabelle begged me to come back to the bar.

There, I was still wearing the shell of a purple shark. And God, I was proud of it. The ocean may have *felt* real but I knew, deep down, that I'd never be that shark. And that eventually, when bedtime rolled around, I'd log out of this space and just be… *Jamie.*

It was stupid. Stupid to feel proud. Stupid to want to stay like this. But I did.

They crowded around me at the bar, peppering me with questions. I answered everything. No dodging. (After all, it wasn't *me* that was talking - it was the big purple shark!)

"Where'd you learn to swim like that?" Jack asked.

"Grew up near a lake. Mom made me take lessons after I panicked and clawed a cousin in the water I used to imagine–no. Maybe another time for that story."

"What's your day job?" Vivian asked.

The purple shark raised her hand almost as if to dismiss the question. “Virtual cubicle farm. Grey on grey on grey. My boss is an algorithm named Stinky Pete.”

Anabelle nodded in agreement. A small cat child - barely a toddler! - hid behind her legs. It felt, well, *maternal*. Sure, we were all roleplaying, but we were still *there*. It’s hard to explain.

“Do you do this kind of thing often?” she asked.

“God, no. I used to write fanfic about this stuff, like, a million years ago. But I haven’t let myself want it in… years.”

There was a silence after that one. Just a beat. Long enough to notice. Short enough to pretend it didn’t happen. I took a long sip of whatever Anabelle had slid into my hand. Something with honey and heat. Something kind.

I wasn’t sure what answer had made the room go quiet. Or maybe I was. I just wasn’t ready to look it in the eye.

Kat’s dry chuckle punctuated the silence. “So how’d you end up at the Zoo?”

“Anabelle gave me a card after I cried in a team meeting,” I said with a shrug. “Corporate didn’t notice. She did.”

Everyone at the table nodded. “Sounds about right,” Kat continued. “And yet, here you are still smiling.”

My shark-face tilted. “Huh?”

The cat’s ears flicked with mild annoyance or smug joy - I didn’t speak cat yet.

“You’ll never forget that feeling. First time you let go?”

She smiled, just a little.

“I don’t get to do that much. Not with Daddy Dearest watching my every move.”

I laughed. “You named yours too?”

Kat wasn’t there anymore. Her eyes stayed open and went nowhere.

The small cat behind Anabelle’s legs—Kitten, I realized—scampered out and curled up around Kat’s ankles like a guard dog in miniature. Watching me with suspicion. Or warning. Or both.

Kit bounded out from the back rooms and grabbed Kat’s shoulder. Shaking hard, he looked at me with a mix of regret and terror.

“I’m so sorry. We know it’s your big party and we made it about us and I’m just so—”

“Hey,” I said, holding up a hand. “You’re okay. Kit, right?”

They nodded, sheepish. “Yeah. Me and Kat and Kitten come here a lot. More than we should, probably.”

I patted a seat a couple stools down. Not crowding. Just close enough to be real. Flopping my fins onto a bar chair felt like Tiny Toons meets Cool World, but the goofiness made it easier. Less dangerous, I guess.

“Is it okay if we just… sit for a minute?”

Kit looked at Kat—still quiet, still distant—and gave a tiny shrug.

“Sure. That’s what we do, sometimes. Sit and breathe ‘til the loud feelings get less loud. That’s what Viv taught us.”

He tugged gently at Kat’s sleeve, grounding her like a tether. Kitten curled tighter around Kat’s ankle, eyes half-lidded, purring. Maybe for her. Maybe for all of us.

We sat like that—just breathing in the same space.

“You know,” I said, looking down at Kit with the warmest gaze my shark-body could muster, “My mom used to say sitting quietly with someone was a kind of love.”

Kit gave me a small, wry smile. “She wasn’t wrong.”

I reached out and touched him. Static crackled up my arm.

“I never really got it until tonight.”

A long, kind silence settled over the bar.

“But don’t tell Kat. She won’t let me live down being all mushy like this!”

At long last, Kat began to stir. Without a word, she shambled off to a back room. But then, right before she reached for the doorknob, she sprinted back across the bar.

She made a beeline for me and then, before I could react, threw her arms around me. She buried her face in my slick, new skin and squeezed as hard as a kid her size could manage.

“Thank you,” she said. And then she ran to a private room, blushing and holding back tears. Kit and Kitten fol-

lowed in tow.

Then the children were gone, and it was just me, Anabelle, Vivian, and Jumpin' Jack around the bar, sharing the silence.

Jack poured himself a glass of carrot juice and sipped it like a fine whisky. Then, his gaze grew stern as his eyes met mine.

"You flinched."

I scanned his face for any sense of the jovial, joking, kind person from the private room. It was still there, but different. Pointed. Direct.

"Excuse me?"

"When Kat hugged you. You flinched like she threw a punch."

"I didn't–" I sighed. Not like I could lie to the guy who has access to the server logs. "–it just caught me off guard, that's all."

Vivian shook her head. She didn't make eye contact.

Her voice came out staticky, retro, buggy, but gentle. "No, it didn't. You were trying to figure out what it would *cost*."

I looked away.

"Look," Jack said, picking his words carefully. He took another sip of the juice. "Some of us came here running from people who only offered kindness with hooks in 'em.

"But you're not there anymore, Jamie."

I laughed. "Yeah? Then where am I?"

The fox held out her paw and I took it, expecting to feel something electric like I did with Kat. Instead, the touch felt *old*. Ancient.

"You're in a place that doesn't think love is scarce," she said. "and I know that's hard to trust when your whole life taught you otherwise."

"I don't deserve this."

The words came out of my mouth before I realized I was saying them.

Jack's words came out rushed and *stern*, for a jackrabbit. "Kid, *none* of us do. But we still show up for each other.

"We still care. We still *help*, like you just did for the Kats."

Vivian gave my fin a squeeze. "You don't have to prove you belong here, Jamie. You just have to *decide* you do."

My eyes stung. I blinked hard. Vivian said nothing; she just sat and held my new fin as something inside me cracked open to fill the space I'd been terrified of taking.

"You're saying I can just… Take it? The seat, the drink, the friends?"

Jack nodded. "No one here gives you a test. You show up, we set another place at the table."

Vivian squeezed harder. "And if you leave, we don't chase.

"But the door stays open."

It was getting harder and harder to talk. I blamed the new face, though Viv and Jack still disagree.

"What if I mess it up?"

"Then we clean it up," Jack said. "Together."

Then I was crying. I curled up into myself, hugging my new body with fins that shouldn't exist and friends I should never have known.

Friends?

I don't have friends.

"I don't think I'm okay," I said.

Jack and Vivian stood from their chairs to surround me in a hug.

The rabbit whispered in my ear. "You don't have to be."

From the other side, Vivian added, "And if you stay long enough, you might remember how.

"Welcome to the Zoo, Jamie. We love having you here."

They let me cry until the tears were all gone. Then, nodding, I clicked my heels.

"See you soon," I said.

"See you soon!" the couple said, waving to me as I left. As I returned to my greige hell I tried to hold onto the feeling of sharkskin and fur, hoping it would last under Stinky's glowing eye.

The next morning there was a knock at the door.

For a half-second I let myself hope it was someone from the night before. It wasn't.

I opened the door to a sweaty, disconnected human. Maybe twenty. Polyester courier shirt clinging to his back, harness glasses fogged at the edges, one eye tracking something I couldn't see — a route overlay, a queue depth, whatever the app paid him to chase. His other eye landed on me without quite focusing.

"Drop," he said, and pushed a piece of cardstock into my hands.

He was already turning before I closed my fingers around it. The harness chirped him into the next pickup. His lips moved with the soft mumble of someone confirming a queue, and he was three doors down the hallway by the time I registered what I was holding. He didn't look at me. He didn't look at the cardstock. Whatever he'd just handed me was, to him, packet 47 of the day.

A *real drawing*, with markers and pencils and ink and all. (You could smell the supplies on the page!) I hadn't seen one in years - not since AI made artists obsolete. But there I was, holding what appeared to be paper salvaged from a BoxCo delivery manifest, and on it was a drawing that another real human being made.

What I saw took my breath away. Someone had drawn a sketch of my shark receiving her first hug in the Zoo. Whoever had drawn it was certainly there that night;

they captured everything, from the details of my shark-skin to the way I winced at Kat's touch.

I turned it over. On the back, in small careful letters:

"For the cool shark lady. Care of Geoff the Mouse."

I felt ashamed; I felt proud. I felt renewed.

I felt *whole*.

Smiling, I taped the drawing over Stinky Pete's eye. *Let them kiss shark*, I thought, and as I logged in for another day of soul-sucking work I had something different driving me.

For the first time in a long time, I had something to look forward to, greige purgatory be damned.



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