IT TAKES A ZOO



A chapter by Austen Tucker

Vivian

I had been polishing the same glass for three minutes, and Nate knew better than to ask why.

He was good at knowing what people would permit themselves to say. That was his gift. He could stand inside a boundary and make the boundary feel like hospitality. It was how he made millions for the family. It was also how he got away with abusing my kid.

Kat sat close enough to the bar that I could find her knee with my cane if she reached. Kit had positioned himself between Kat and the room without calling it that.

“Mouse,” I said. “Down.”

“I'm fine up here.”

“I know exactly where you are. Come down anyway.”

His claws went tack-tack across the bartop. Gemini reached over and rubbed the back of his head.

“You eat today?” she asked.

“I had cheese.”

“That's not eating, that's coping.”

Nate leaned across the bar toward him.

“New snakesim dropped — adrenal boosters this build, it's a *riot*, your whole nervous system thinks it's falling off a cliff and your body knows it's safe. Best feeling there is. I'll comp you the first dive.”

“Fourth time this week,” Geoff said.

“And I'll ask a fifth, because you'll love it. Persistence is a love language.”

I could hold this. Even if my hatred burned bright enough to make the architecture tighten around it. I could keep it while every room he had touched sat inside my body like a splinter I was not allowed to pull until my daughter said *now*.

Then Nate laughed. His eyes searched for Kat’s.

“Why does the little one hide from the Snickersnack?”

The voice was ridiculous. Wet and serpentine. A joke with too many teeth.

Kat flinched.

Nate smiled.

My hand closed around the glass. The render knew better than to let it break.

Across the bar, Jack stopped with his rosé halfway to his mouth. I counted the seconds he stayed there before I heard the glass return to the table. Seven.

He had not seen the rooms. He had not heard the name come apart in Kat's throat. He did not know why I had gone cold, only that I had. But he saw Nate look at a frightened kid and smile like somebody had handed him a private answer.

For one second, I wanted to reach through the bar, through the promise, through every locked door my daughter had needed, and make Jack understand all of it at once.

Figure it out, you silly rabbit!

I didn't.

I set the glass down. Kept my voice low. Deliberate.

“You can stay right there, love. Nate’s just showing his ass.”

The reassurance was not enough. It was what I had.

Jack stood. He huffed. I knew the sound too well. Military. Grunts recognizing bad orders.

He looked at Kat. Not at me. Kat. They had a conversation over a glance.

“Need something?”

Kat looked at Nate, then back at Jack. She nodded.

“OK. I’ll be right back,” he said, and promptly blinked out of existence.

Nate sipped at his cup.

“What’s that all about?”

“Probably a bugfix. You know how the Kats’ harness can be here. We’re not exactly running stock SP sims here.”

A private message appeared in my awareness.

Jack: We need to talk.

I stared at it.

Me: I know.

Jack: No. I mean we need to TALK.

I closed the message before Nate could ask why I'd gone quiet.

Jamie came in a moment later.

I knew her footsteps before she spoke. She had a particular way of entering a room, as though she expected it to be pleased to see her. Usually, it was.

“Jamie!” Nate said, all warmth. “Just the woman I wanted to see.”

“Fuck you, Nate.”

No greeting. No hesitation. Jamie kept walking.

I heard her footsteps cross the floor, then the scrape of a chair beside Kit.

The silence afterward was exquisite.

Nate gave a little laugh.

“Well. Somebody's in a mood.”

Nobody answered.

I picked up the glass again. His cup touched the bar. He picked it up again. Set it down.

“Nobody's going to tell me what that's about?”

I polished the glass.

Then I heard the notification.

A soft, familiar chime, followed by the particular silence of someone reading something they hadn't expected.

Jack’s voice was everywhere and nowhere: “Emergency maintenance window, everyone.”

Nate stopped breathing for a moment.

“Excuse me,” he said.

His voice was different now.

There was a second chime.

I wondered what Jack had done.

I wondered if I wanted to know.

Nate pushed his stool back. Too quickly. One of its legs caught against the floor, and he made a small, irritated noise.

“Vivian.”

I waited.

“Is there something you want to tell me?”

“No, Nate.”

A pause.

“Where's Jack?”

“I told you. Probably fixing something.”

Another notification.

He didn't bother with an excuse. Usually when we banned someone there was a public show of it: the avatar melting like a witch, maybe; or Jack would manhandle the unwanted guest out the front door.

But Nate? Nate just blinked out.

No goodbye. No polite little promise to catch up later. No last word.

Gone.

For a while, nobody said anything.

I set the glass on the shelf behind me. It had been clean for ten minutes.

Kat's voice came from the other side of the bar.

“Everything okay?”

I turned toward her.

“Yeah, sweetheart.”

I reached across the bar, palm up, and waited until her hand found mine.

“Your dad's gonna take care of it.”

Jack

I never thought to check the logs before. I never thought I'd need to—not with the Zoo. The Zoo was home. Home was safe.

I reached back to take Vivian's warm, limp hand. Not that she could feel it anymore, but it made me feel a little better to know I wasn't alone in this.

I thought about Katrina lying on her bed and wired into our home. How many times had he defiled her? How bad was it?

Vivian watched me from a window in the corner of my computer. Her brows furrowed.

"Come back to the Zoo, honey. The Kats need you."

My hands danced across the keyboard as I typed old, familiar commands. Sure enough, there was the proxy that fit my kid like a glove, if that glove was fucked up and had a propensity for snuff films.

I sorted the sessions by date. There were more than would fit on the screen. I scrolled to the bottom, checked the filter, ran it again. Same result.

I found the first session. Watched. Then I scrubbed through enough others to stop counting.

One of the timestamps put it in the middle of the afternoon. I checked the date against my own connections. I'd been home. Right here, at this computer, with my wife behind me and my daughter down the hall.

I sat back far enough for the chair to bump the bed.

"Jack."

I opened the session details. His connection. Hers. The proxy between them. I followed the identifiers back to their accounts, though I already knew whose they were. There was nobody else it could be.

I checked anyway.

"Jack, come back to the Zoo, honey."

"In a minute."

"Look at me."

I moved her window aside to get to the export controls, then stopped with the cursor still over her face.

I closed the session details. Saved the logs somewhere Nate couldn't reach. Checked the copy.

"I know."

There was more to look at. Dates to match up. Things I'd been in the house for.

I'd look later.

"How long have you known?"

Vivian's mouth tightened.

"Jack. Come in here. We need to talk."

"I'm asking you now."

She looked away from me, toward something outside the little rectangle I'd given her. I couldn't see who was there. I almost asked her to turn the camera before I remembered there wasn't one.

"Kat needs to be part of that conversation."

I looked at the list again. I wanted a date from Vivian. Something I could put beside the others. As if knowing when she'd learned would change how long I hadn't.

"Okay," I said.

"Will you come back?"

I minimized the logs and made her window bigger. She watched me do it.

I reached back and gave her hand a squeeze. Her skin was warm. I rubbed my thumb across her knuckles, watching her face on the screen for some sign she could feel it.

"Where are you going?"

"To check on her."

"You can talk to her here."

"I want to see her."

"Jack."

I knew that voice. I'd heard it across dinner tables, through bathroom doors, in the dark when she couldn't see my face. I kept rubbing her knuckles. On the screen, her hands were still.

"Then come back. Please."

I couldn't tell her yes. She waited long enough to know it before I set her hand beside her on the bed.

The hallway was dark. I stepped around the board that creaked outside the bedroom Nate and I shared.

Nate was staying overnight at work. He did that when a job ran long, and I was used to coming home from the Zoo to an empty bed.

I kept walking.

Kat's door was open a few inches. I pushed it far enough to see her on the bed, wired into our home. I'd bought the equipment. Checked every connection myself. Made sure nothing pulled when she rolled over.

I sat beside her.

The mattress dipped beneath me. Her arm shifted toward my leg, and I caught it before it slid off the bed. For a second it felt like she'd reached for me.

There was a little crease in her palm where she'd been lying on it. I smoothed it with my thumb. Her fingers rested loose in mine.

“Hey, sweetheart.”

I wanted her to squeeze back. I knew where she was, knew why she couldn’t, and still I waited.

I could go back down the hall. Put the headset on. Sit wherever she wanted me to sit and listen for as long as she wanted to talk.

I tried to work out what I would say first. Whether she’d want me to know I knew. Whether she’d be watching my face while I tried to keep it from telling her how much I’d seen.

“I’m here.”

Too quiet. I cleared my throat, then remembered she couldn’t hear me either.

I lifted her hand and kissed it. Held it against my mouth for another breath before I put it down.

The cable had caught beneath her wrist. I eased it free.

I stayed until the crease in her palm had faded. When I let go, I laid her hand flat on the sheet so she wouldn’t roll onto it again. I checked the cable once more from the doorway.

Then I went to the gun safe.

I entered the code correctly the first time.

There were things in there I hadn’t touched in years. I’d kept them clean anyway. Checked them when the clocks changed, along with the smoke detectors.

I took out what I needed.

Closed the safe.

For a moment I stood with my hand on the door, listening to the house. Nothing from Kat's room. Nothing from Vivian's.

Nate hadn't turned off location sharing yet. Still at work.

Good.

Vivian

The others stayed.

Ana pulled up a chair, and we made space for the kids to cry their eyes dry.

Then Kit wanted to make a drink.

He and Kat were behind the bar, arguing over what it should do. Kitten sat across from them with both hands around an empty glass, waiting to find out what she'd agreed to taste.

"Something fizzy," Kat said.

"It's already fizzy."

"More fizzy."

"You want to drink it or breathe it?"

Kat laughed. Her face was still wet.

I moved the glasses within their reach and let them have my end of the bar. Jamie was telling Ana what a piece of shit Nate was, loudly enough that Geoff had given up pretending not to listen. Gemini sat beside Kitten. Nobody was asking the kids any questions.

I got a notification when the safe opened. I made Jack promise me that much: that I would always know where his sidearm was.

I read it twice.

Behind me, something fizzed over the rim of a glass.

“Shit,” Kit said.

“Tray’s underneath,” I told him.

I opened Jack’s messages. My last one was still there.

How’s it going?

He’d sent back a thumbs-up.

I checked his location. Watched it move along the road, pause at an intersection, move again.

Jack. I saw you opened the gun safe.

Kat asked me where I kept the little umbrellas.

“Drawer on your left, love.”

I waited for him to answer. The marker kept moving.

Call me.

Kitten took a cautious sip. The bubbles lifted her whiskers, then her ears. Kit laughed so hard he had to lean against the counter.

Jack read the message.

Nothing.

I called him. Let it ring until it stopped.

He knew what I wanted. I knew he had his phone in front of him. He was using it to get wherever he was going.

Please come home.

For a moment his location stopped. I sat with that, watching the little dot, giving him time to turn around.

Then it moved through the intersection.

“Mum?”

Kat was holding out a glass.

I took it. Something blue curled around the ice.

“What’s it do?”

“You have to try it.”

I drank. The fizz climbed into my nose and came out as a single enormous soap bubble.

Kat smiled at me through it.

“Oh, that’s horrible,” I said.

“We know,” Kit said.

I put the glass down before they could see my hand shaking.

There were people here who could sit with them. Ana would stay all night. So would Jamie, and Geoff, and Gemini. But I couldn’t do that to them.

And I couldn’t go after Jack myself, which hurt more than I expected it to.

I typed his name again, then erased it. The map stayed open at the edge of my awareness.

Then three knocks came at the door.

Geoff looked up. I hadn't heard him come down from his perch.

"Expecting somebody?" Ana asked.

I shook my head. "Want to do the honors, Jamie?"

She stood tall - it was nice to see her standing tall, all purple sharkskin and muscles. Confidence looked good on her. "Yeah, sure."

I heard three young people chatting just outside the door, crowded close together. Two girls and a boy.

"Oh my God," one of the girls said.

Her friend caught her arm. All three were looking past Jamie.

"Can I help you?"

The boy bubbled with energy. Then, after a nervous laugh and another "omigod" under his breath this time, he pushed forward.

"We heard CancerCancer was here."

Gemini turned on her stool. I swear that I could hear her eyebrow rise up.

"There's no CancerCancer event here," I said. "Where did you get this address?"

"We saw the meetup appear on our forum today," the girl said. "It's so cool you're doing this! And the sim is so real--"

“We’re not,” I said. “But you can come in for a drink. Please don’t pass the address around.”

The boy looked at Kitten’s whiskers, which were still fizzing.

“Does that hurt?”

“It’s disgusting,” Kitten said.

“Want one?” Kit asked.

I found three more glasses.

Another three knocks came before I’d filled them.

Jack

She kept calling.

I wanted desperately for her to stop calling. The gun felt heavy pressed against my hip. That's all I wanted to be at that point: cold, collected, inevitable.

My car radio buzzed to life, and the fox was suddenly there, staring back at me from the center console.

“Don't make me hack your car, Jack. You know I can.”

I groaned. “I'm busy.”

There was a stoplight. I blew through it. Half a mile to go.

“We can call the police.”

“And tell them what?”

“What he did.”

“To the seventeen-year-old trans girl living in our house? The one we never actually adopted?”

“Jack.”

“Our husband, Viv. Our live-in husband raped her. Mutilated her. Murdered her, over and over again! So what, we tell the cops and then CPS takes the kids. Then Nate tells them about the Frame, and we get to explain why I'm practicing medicine without a license.”

“I know what's in our house.”

“Then you know what happens when they come looking.”

“Pull over.”

“Viv—”

“You took the gun. Don't make me spend this whole call pretending you didn't.”

“Don't get in my way.”

“And what, you're gonna kill him? Then what happens to the girls when you're in *prison*?”

I didn't answer.

“Jack?”

I reached over and killed the connection.

His dot had started moving while Vivian and I were arguing. By the time I reached the office, he was pulling out of the lot.

I pulled up beside him at the exit. For a second we looked at each other through my passenger window.

“Going somewhere, Nate?”

He couldn't hear me through the glass. He didn't need to.

He got out and ran, leaving his door open and the engine running.

I left mine running too.

He wasn't hard to catch. Years of lying on a couch with a wire in your skull don't do shit for your cardio, and I'd never let my conditioning go. He looked back once, mouth open, already struggling for breath.

I tackled him before he reached the corner of the building.

We hit the pavement hard. He twisted beneath me, trying to get onto his back, and I went with him. His shirt bunched in my fist.

“Jack. Christ, wait—”

I straddled him and rained hammer fists down on his face. He got his arms up. I kept going.

I thought about those hands in my home. The drinks we'd shared. All the times I'd trusted him with my family because he was Nate, because of course Nate was welcome.

He was saying something behind his arms. I couldn't make it out over my own breathing.

He looked small. That's what I remember most; after years of looking up to him, and loving him, and having him in the family, he looked small curled beneath me with his arms over his head and blood oozing from his nose.

I had gotten so used to seeing him as a snake that I forgot that he was still a man, flesh and blood.

It was late, and we were in the business district, but I still knew better than to keep this up under a streetlight. So I pulled him to his feet and shoved him down an alley. He stumbled, probably still reeling from the first fight he'd ever been in in his life.

I knew that much about him. I loved that about him, once.

Nate had always been gentle. He was the one who cried at movies. The one who fed stray cats and remembered birthdays. Once, when Kat was sick, he'd driven across town in a snowstorm to get the particular brand of ginger ale she liked.

I'd loved him for that.

I'd loved him for so many things.

I drew the gun.

His eyes fixed on it, wide with terror. Good. It was the least I could do to repay what he did to Katrina.

For a moment neither of us dared to speak.

Then Nate made it worse.

“I can explain—”

“Stuff it, Nate.” I moved toward him, keeping the gun trained on him.

My phone rang. Vivian.

Not now. I'm busy.

“How many times did you do it to her?”

He shook his head and waved his hands in denial.

“Now, I never touched her. Not even once, Jack. If you'd just let me explain—”

I closed the distance. “How. Many. Times?”

“Look, man, you know me! It was this group of braindancers I fell in with! I—I've got a problem, Jack. I'm fucked up inside.”

I waited.

“I know that. Okay? I'm not saying I don't know that. But it wasn't what you think.”

“I've seen the logs.”

“I know, but you don't understand the context.”

“The context.”

“Yeah. The context. It wasn't real, Jack. It was the Zoo.”

I looked at him.

He seemed to take my silence as encouragement.

“You know how people get in there. You know how it is. People do things they wouldn't do outside. Everybody knows that.”

“She's seventeen.”

“I know how old she is!”

He looked genuinely offended that I'd reminded him.

“Jesus, Jack. I'm not stupid. I know how it looks. But nobody was actually getting hurt. It was all virtual. Nobody touched anybody.”

I took a step toward him.

He flinched so hard he nearly fell.

“You made her scream.”

He swallowed.

“I didn't—”

“I heard her, Nate. I pulled the recordings. I heard my daughter screaming.”

“That's what I'm trying to explain! The whole thing was a scene. It was supposed to be a scene.”

“She didn't consent.”

“I know that *now*.”

“Now?”

“I thought she understood what was happening! I thought everybody understood!”

I stared at him.

“I mean, look, some of the guys in the group, they get pretty extreme. And I went along with it. I shouldn't have. I'm not proud of it. But I didn't start any of this, Jack. That's what I'm trying to tell you.”

“You used our home.”

He blinked.

“You used the Zoo. You used the place we built to keep our family safe, and you hurt my daughter in it.”

“Jack, please. I didn't know she was going to take it like that.”

I felt my finger tighten.

Nate saw it.

“I'm sorry! Okay? I'm sorry. I've got a problem. I know I've got a problem. I'll get help. I'll go to therapy. Whatever you want.”

He was crying now.

“I never touched her,” he said again.

I waited for him to hear himself. He watched my face instead, checking whether it had worked.

“Jack, buddy, please. You know me.”

I did. I remembered Kat drinking ginger ale on the couch. He'd driven through a snowstorm for that bottle, and now he wanted credit for never touching her.

My arm was getting tired. I checked where the muzzle was pointing. Still at his chest. My hand hadn't made any decisions without me. Good.

I'd come here to wrestle with God, and instead I was standing in an alley listening to a frightened little man explain why raping my daughter didn't count.

I'd checked the logs twice. He'd heard the same recordings. There wasn't a better export I could show him.

If I pulled the trigger, Kat would still have been hurt. Vivian would be waiting at home. The girls would lose their father to a prison cell, and somebody else would have to check the cables, keep the Frame running, sit beside Kat until she wanted to talk.

I'd left both cars running in the street. Excellent work, Jack. Very fucking collected.

I lowered the gun.

Nate sagged against the wall.

“Oh, thank God.”

I almost laughed.

Of course that was what he'd say.

“Jesus Christ, Nate.”

He wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

“I knew you'd understand. I knew if I could just explain—”

“Shut up.”

He shut up.

I looked at him for a long time.

“I used to look up to you.”

Something passed across his face. For one brief second I thought he might finally understand.

Then he said, “You still can, Jack. I can get better.”

I put the gun away.

“Don't come home.”

“Jack—”

“Don't call. Don't message the girls. Don't try to explain yourself to Kat. You don't get to ask her for forgiveness. You don't get to ask any of us.”

“But my stuff—”

“I'll send it.”

He opened his mouth.

“I'm not negotiating with you, Nate.”

I turned toward the street.

Behind me, he started crying again.

I didn't feel better. I wasn't even angry anymore. I'd driven across town with a gun to kill someone I loved, and all I wanted now was to go home, take a shower, and hold my daughter.

I had almost thrown my whole family away for this man.

For *Nate*.

My phone vibrated.

Vivian again, I assumed. I reached for it, already composing an apology in my head.

Then it vibrated a second time.

And a third.

I looked down.

An automated page from the Zoo.

I hadn't seen that particular alert in years.

Not since the migration. Not since we'd finished isolating the Zoo's critical infrastructure from the rest of the world.

ZOO PRIMARY: UNREACHABLE

Another alert appeared beneath it.

ZOO SECONDARY: UNREACHABLE

I stopped walking.

No.

That wasn't possible.

Both systems couldn't go down at once. They were geographically separated. Independent power, independent networking, independent everything. We'd built them that way for a reason.

My phone rang again.

Vivian.

I answered.

“Viv?”

Nothing.

“Vivian?”

The call dropped.

I tried again.

No connection.

A cold sensation spread through my chest.

The Zoo wasn't just a place where people played games. It wasn't a website that could go down for a few hours while someone fixed a server.

It was home.

Vivian was *in there*.

I opened the monitoring dashboard.

Red.

Everywhere.

The connection metrics were climbing off the charts, even as the services themselves disappeared. Something was hammering the edge gateways with more traffic than I'd ever seen. The old guest routes were accepting connections on both clusters.

I'd closed those years ago.

Nate had stopped crying when I answered Vivian. Now I heard his breath catch behind me.

I turned. His eyes went from my phone to my face. He wiped beneath his nose, looked at the blood on his hand, and gave a little wet chuckle.

He stayed against the wall. His other hand was still shaking. But he was watching me now instead of the gun.

“What did you do?”

He shrugged.

“Nothing.”

“Nate.”

“Look, man, I told you. I've got friends.”

I stared at him.

He gave me a small, apologetic smile.

“You *may* want to ack that pager call, buddy.”

Vivian

We tried to be neighborly about it. It wasn’t the kids’ fault that they found our home, after all.

But three became six, six became sixteen, and before we knew it the walls were starting to melt.

By the time Jack answered my call, the bottles behind the bar had lost their labels.

I heard him say my name. I couldn't get a word out before the call dropped.

I'd closed the public entrance. People kept arriving through doors I hadn't opened. One girl landed on her knees. A boy appeared halfway through a stool, then beside it, already falling.

The boy from the first group was trying to tell the ones behind him that there wasn't a show.

The floor shifted under them. Everybody stopped.

“Keep moving,” I said.

Only the first word came out.

I sent the evacuation notice.

Ana acked it from her apartment. Her voice came through garbled: "The public lockout’s being bypassed. Every port is open, Viv. It’s gonna take time to fix."

Someone near the bar had both hands pressed against their temples. A girl kept lifting her foot to take the same step. Lift. Lift. Then she was three feet farther forward, screaming.

I stripped the textures.

The wood grain vanished under my hand. Bottles, walls, clothes went flat. For a moment I could see everyone.

Then more people arrived.

“Out,” I managed. “Keep—”

Jamie went to the door. Gemini caught the girl who couldn't finish her step. Her legs moved after the rest of her had stopped.

I took the detail out of the ceiling. The shelves. The glasses behind the bar. I couldn't get the glasses without taking the bottles too.

Gone.

Geoff ran along the rail, pointing people toward Jamie.

“Stay together,” he told them. “You can go home. It's all right.”

His mouth kept moving after the words stopped.

I tried to mark the exit. A white strip appeared across the floor, broke into squares, disappeared beneath someone's feet.

No. Too much.

I took the rail. The stools. The bar.

People became grey shapes. I knew where Gemini had been. I wasn't sure which one was Gemini now.

The walls went next. Nothing left but their edges, thin lines around a room I could no longer afford to show them.

More requests pressed against the doorways.

I stopped counting them. I counted the people I could still find inside.

My cane struck the floor. The sound came back after I'd lifted it again.

“Viv?”

Geoff had stopped. His harness was beside him. Behind them, a door appeared twice, one copy a little to the left of the other.

“Which one?” he asked.

I tried to point. My hand hadn't finished arriving.

His harness caught his sleeve and pulled him away from the false door.

“Go, mouse.”

He turned toward me.

I kept the floor under his feet until I couldn't feel it anymore.

Jack

I ran every red light. Nearly caused a crash along the way too.

My hands danced across the console until I had Ana on the horn.

“I got the page,” she said by way of hello. “Jesus, Dad. What did you do?”

“Nothing, unfortunately,” I hissed. “Clear your schedule. Meet me at home.”

“Done.”

“Thanks, Ana.”

She stayed on the line while I tried the recovery controls again. The request spun. I looked up in time to miss a parked car, then back down.

Timed out.

“I can’t reach her.”

“I know. I’m getting my things.”

“She called me. I hung up on her.”

“Jack. Are you driving?”

“Yeah.”

“Then drive. Let me work.”

I took my hand off the console. Put it on the wheel. I’d been trying to steer with my wrist.

“Okay.”

“I’ll meet you there.”

I considered it for a moment.

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Another red light. I smashed the accelerator.

The dashboard refreshed. Both sites still red.

I tried Kat. No answer.

That didn’t tell me anything. She was wired in. Her phone could be on the bed beside her, buzzing against the sheet while she waited for someone to tell her what was happening.

I tried Kit.

Nothing.

I knew what to do when a service went down. Check the scope. Isolate the fault. Stop making changes until you knew which ones would help. We had procedures for this. I’d written most of them.

I couldn’t get past the list of people who weren’t answering.

The gun dug into my hip when I leaned into a turn. I shifted to get it out from under the seat belt.

A horn sounded beside me. I jerked the wheel back into my lane.

“Get home,” I said.

I closed the dashboard. I couldn't fix it from the car, and every time I looked down I risked making sure Ana would have to fix it without me.

The console offered to call Vivian again.

"Yes."

It rang this time.

I took my foot off the accelerator so I could hear.

"Come on, honey."

Then it stopped.

Vivian

At first, there was only darkness.

Then, relief. I drifted. *Finally, a chance to sleep.*

Then I felt something in my palm, small enough that I waited for it to disappear. A warmth. I kept my attention on it, afraid I would lose it if I tried to find anything else.

But it stayed in the same place. I could begin to find my palm around it, the place where my fingers ought to curl. When I lost track of them, I went back to the warmth and started again.

Jack.

He was holding my hand. I couldn't have explained how I knew, and I didn't want to spend any of this trying. I wanted him to know I was here.

Come find me, Jack.

I tried to close my fingers around his hand, concentrating on the small movement it would take to squeeze. I couldn't tell whether they moved or whether he could feel anything at all. I stayed with the warmth in my palm and tried again.

He had me.

For a while, that was enough. I stopped trying to find the rest of my body. Whatever had happened, whatever he was doing out there, he knew where I was. I could rest until he figured out how to reach me.

I had the feeling of letting out a breath I'd been holding for hours.

Then I waited for the next one.

I couldn't feel it.

I tried to breathe on purpose. There ought to have been a movement somewhere, a pull in my chest, air passing through my nose. I couldn't find any of it. I didn't know whether I needed to breathe or whether something was doing it for me.

The warmth was still there.

I concentrated on that until the fear eased. Jack wouldn't be sitting there holding my hand if I were suffocating. There would be alarms. People would be—

I couldn't hear anything either.

I started counting seconds.

One. Two. Three.

At sixty, I would have a minute. At sixty minutes, an hour. I could keep track. When he got me out, I could tell him how long I'd waited.

I got into the forties before I realized I was counting too fast.

I started again.

This time I lost count somewhere after twelve. I couldn't remember whether I'd been saying thirteen or thirty. There was nothing to measure myself against. No heartbeat. No breath. I could have been leaving whole minutes between the numbers.

I went back to my hand.

The warmth was gone.

Jack?

I tried to reach for him. I couldn't find my arm. I tried to open my eyes and had no idea whether they were already open.

Jack.

Maybe he'd let go to type something. Maybe someone had come into the room. People needed both their hands sometimes. I knew that.

I tried counting again. I kept stopping to check for him.

Eventually the warmth returned, and I forgot the number.

Don't let me go. Please. Just stay here.

I tried to squeeze. Tried to pull him toward me, tried to make anything happen that would tell him I was still here.

But I needed him to work, too.

I tried to imagine the room around my body. The Kats watching over me while Jack and Ana ran thousands of coding agents. I knew which ones they would invoke. I could almost picture Jack arranging the work, making them check each other, getting angry when something failed.

I couldn't remember their names.

I went looking for one and lost Ana's instead.

There had been someone working with Jack. I knew her. If I could see her face—

I abandoned that and went back to the hand.

The world slipped into dreams.

I was behind the bar, washing a glass. Warm water ran over my fingers, and I held them under the tap until it started to hurt.

Someone needed a drink.

I turned off the water. There were people sitting along the bar, their faces clear until I tried to look at them. Then I had to look somewhere else.

"What can I get you?"

Nobody answered.

I dried the glass. It was still wet when I finished, so I dried it again.

There was something I was supposed to be doing.

The towel caught between my fingers. I pulled it free and felt a hand holding mine. For a moment I remembered everything.

Jack. I'm here.

Then I was at the other end of the bar, looking for the glass I'd put down. I knew I'd just had it. Someone was waiting, and I couldn't keep wandering around like this.

I opened a cupboard. Empty. Opened the next one.

By the third cupboard I'd forgotten what I was looking for.

That frightened me enough to wake me, or bring me closer to waking. There was no bar. I couldn't feel my hand.

My name was Vivian.

I said it again.

Vivian.

Jack was coming for me. Ana was helping him. The Kats were with my body. I went through it until I could remember all of them without stopping. When I was sure I had it, I started again anyway.

Somewhere in the middle, I found myself sitting down.

There was a bed beside me. Clean sheets, pillowy comforter turned back. I knew how they would feel against my legs. I was so tired I could barely keep my head up.

I could lie down and wait for Jack.

I lifted the covers.

He would know where to find me.

Then I couldn't remember what he was supposed to find.

I sat with the bedsheet in my hand, trying to work it out. It mattered. I knew it mattered, but the bed was warm and I'd been trying for so long.

Vivian.

I said it before it could go.

I pushed the covers away.

The bed disappeared. So did the room. I was back in the dark, frightened and exhausted, with nothing to show for it except my own name.

I kept saying it.

Sometimes I knew why. Sometimes I had to trust that I'd had a reason when I started.

The warmth came back while I was struggling to remember Jack.

I stopped searching. Stayed with it. Found the place where my fingers ought to curl.

This time I tried just one.

Again, I told myself. I couldn't tell whether it moved.

I tried again.

———

Jack: You there?
Jack: Viv, hold on
Jack: fuck
Jack: Fuckfuckfuck
Jack: Answer me. Please.

Jack logged off.
Jack logged in.

Jack: i
Jack: I'm home.
Jack: Kids are okay. I'm home with Kat now. Ana's on her way over.
Jack: You don't have to worry about them.
Jack: Can you read this?

Jack logged off.
Jack logged in.

Jack: The render won't start. I'm getting the same error here.
Jack: I'm going to try another way in. You'll lose this window.

Jack logged off.

Connection failed.
Connection failed.

Jack logged in.

Jack: Viv?
Jack: Found part of the old chat service. I don't know if it's reaching you.
Jack: No voice. Just this.
Jack: If you can see it, type something.

Jack: Anything. Doesn't have to be a word.

Jack: There's still brain activity. I can see it.
Jack: I'm checking what's answering and what's just stuck.

Jack: Kat brought me water.
Jack: Put it right next to my hand until I took it.
Jack: You would've laughed.

Jack: Please.

Jack: I found the outgoing queue.
Jack: There's something in it. Hang on.

Vivian: Jack?

Jack: Viv?

Vivian: Jack?

Jack: I thought I'd lost you.

Vivian: I'm here.

Jack: Oh fuck.
Jack: Okay.
Jack: I can see you. Your messages. I can see your messages.

Vivian: Where are the kids?

Jack: Home. Safe. Kat's with me. Ana's working the Zoo outage.
Jack: Did you get any of what I sent?

Vivian: Some.
Vivian: They keep arriving jumbled.
Vivian: Time feels weird right now.

Jack: Take your time.

Vivian: I thought you'd gone.

Jack: I had to come home. I couldn't reach the recovery tools from there.
Jack: I've been here.

Vivian: I couldn't tell.

Jack: I know.
Jack: I'm sorry.

Vivian: Can you hear me?

Jack: No. Can you hear anything?

Vivian: No.
Vivian: I keep trying to talk.

Jack: Text is working. We can use this while I work on the rest.

Vivian: Can you bring the room back?

Jack: Not yet. Ana's working on that one.

Vivian: Even the old one?

Jack: It won't load either.
Jack: I'm looking for what's missing.

Vivian: How long?

Jack: I don't know.

Vivian: Jack?

Jack: Here.

Vivian: Don't log off again.

Jack: I need to check something in another window. This one stays open.

Vivian: Will I still be able to reach you?

Jack: Yes.
Jack: Always.
Jack: Send me something. I'll answer.

Vivian: Now?

Jack: Now.

Vivian: Jack.

Jack: Here.

Vivian: Time keeps slipping away from me.

Jack: It's been a few days.
Vivian: Days?
Jack: We're working on it.

Vivian: Jack?
Jack: Yes?
Vivian: What happened to Nate?
Vivian: Do I want to know?

Jack: ...
Jack: He's alive.
Vivian: Think he did this?
Jack: I saw the code. It was him.
Jack: Bastard.
Jack: He's probably lost to the wind now.

Vivian: Jack?
Vivian: ...Jack?

Vivian: Oh no.
Jack: I'm here. Was sleeping. The Kats insisted. They're doing good.
Jack: Kit says you gotta wake up. Kat's not left your side
Jack: I set up a cot by the Frame for her
Jack: She's a good kid.
Vivian: Oh thank fuck.

Vivian: It's dark. I keep losing myself.
Vivian: Promise me you'll find a fix.
Vivian: I can't live like this.
Vivian: ...Jack?
Jack: Ana here. I made him eat something.
Jack: I almost have a space for you
Jack: It's not the Zoo but it has mass and takes up space, so it's at least something.
Vivian: Thank you sweetheart. I trust you.
Jack changed nickname to Ana
Ana: ...
Ana: ...I know, mama. I know.

I heard Ana's voice poking through the dream. "Testing, 1, 2, 3."

Then, another voice: "Viv? You in there?"

Jack.

I fought to make the words. Breathed breath I couldn't control. Found meaning I couldn't remember.

"I'm here."

Cheers erupted. I heard Ana and the Kats. And Jack won't like me saying so, but I could hear the lilt in his voice as the tears started flowing.

The voices still felt… flat, somehow. No soundstaging, no raytraced audio, no niceties I was used to. I tried probing the interface from my end and found out we were chatting on a very old protocol - one of the first we ever put together to get me out of my body. It wasn't the Zoo, which worried me greatly.

But the passage of time? Time was back online. I could have kissed Jack for that, if I could.

"Can you all see me?"

"We're on an old audio-only protocol."

Jack's voice rumbled my world. I had forgotten what his actual voice sounded like; after years of knowing only Jumping Jack Rabbit, hearing the real thing was almost off-putting.

Gods, I missed the Zoo.

"At least we're on a level playing field then. I should ask you all to put on blindfolds or something - then it'd be totally even stevens."

They tried to laugh at the joke, but nobody was in the mood for laughing.

Then all went quiet, and the silence felt like years.

"Viv?"

I dreamed. Then I found the words.

"Here. How bad is it?"

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