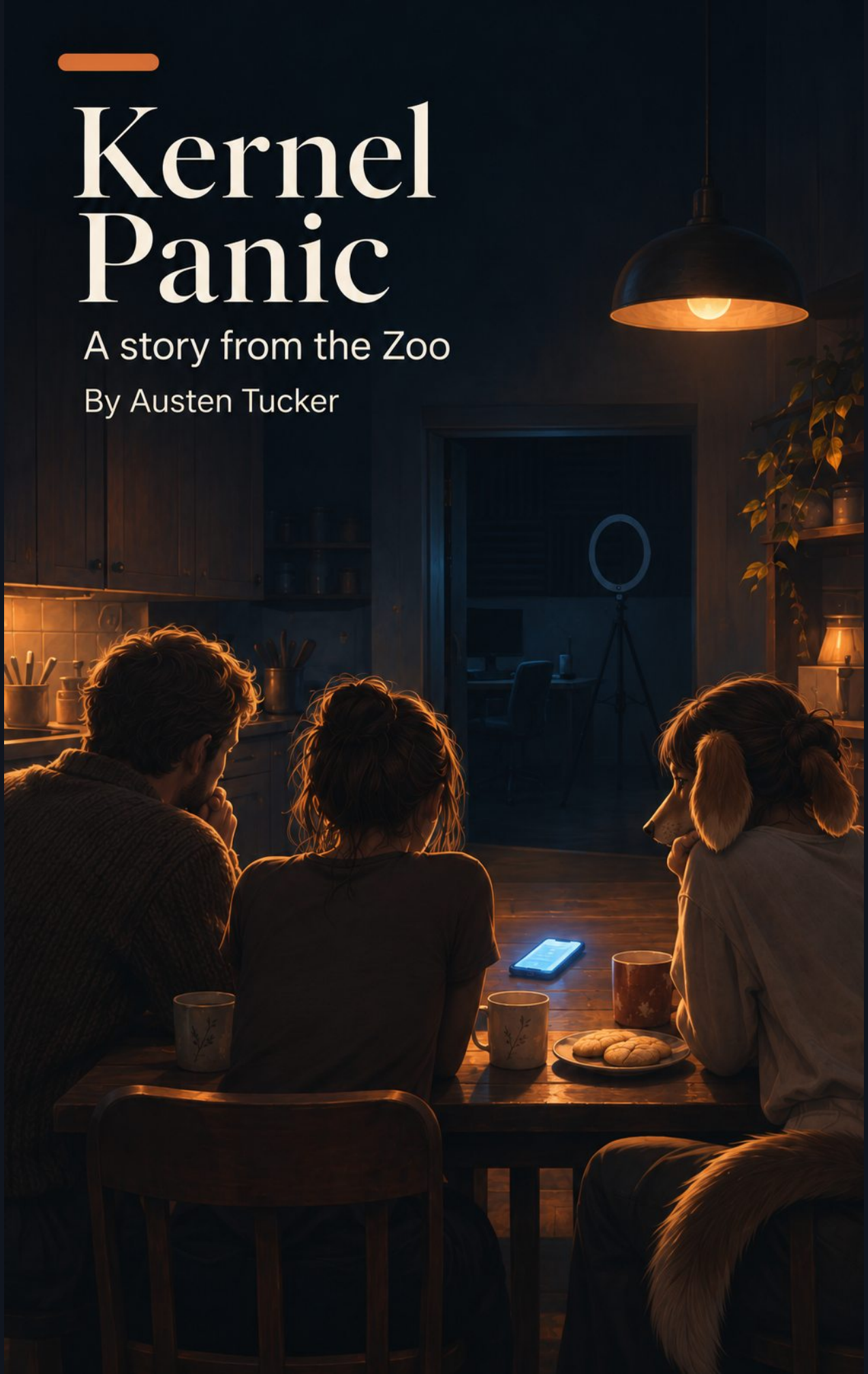
Kernel Panic

A story from the Zoo

By Austen Tucker



Geoff

The Zoo let me go before I knew whether it was safe to leave.

One moment I was a mouse standing on the white evacuation path with my harness gripping my sleeve. The next, my apartment had come back around me: twelve feet in each direction, gray counter, kettle, the painting I'd been trying not to think about. Sprig projected herself at the foot of the bed. She had a hand on my arm. I don't know if she had caught me or if I had reached for her.

“You're out,” she said.

“Is everybody?”

“I don't know.”

The Zoo status page gave us an evacuation notice, then nothing. I refreshed it until the phone grew warm in my palm. There was no new line to read. No count. No message from Vivian. Nothing from Jack.

I tried Vivian's private line.

Nothing.

I tried again.

The call didn't even ring. The network returned an error I hadn't seen before, something about the destination being unavailable. I stared at it, trying to work out whether that meant her account had gone offline or whether the whole system was simply refusing calls.

“Come on, Vivian.”

Sprig touched my shoulder. I wished I could feel it.

“She was still in there,” I told her. “She was still in the Zoo when they started evacuating.”

“I know.”

“She can't just disconnect. Not like us.”

“I know, Geoff.”

I opened the status page again. The same notice. I tried Jack. Nothing. I tried Ana and got another error.

I'd spent so much time in the Zoo that I sometimes forgot the whole thing lived on machines somewhere. Machines that could break. Machines that could be switched off. Machines that could take everyone I loved with them.

I drew my legs up onto the bed and stared at the cheese for a while. Tried the status page again. And again.

“She's already sick,” I said. “What happens if she's still connected when everything goes down?”

Sprig sat beside me.

“I don't know.”

Someone knocked. I heard Jamie's voice in the hall.

“Is Geoff here?”

I got to my feet, opened the door, and threw myself into her. She wrapped her arms around me, and I her, and I left wet spots on her drab t-shirt.

She and I stayed like that for a while. Then, as I pulled away, she shook a small rectangular box at me.

“Gin rummy?”

“What?”

“Card game.” She waved the box at me. “My grandpa made sure I knew how to play it.”

“What's a card?”

Jamie looked at the box, then at me.

“Oh, this is going to be educational.”

She opened the box and slid out a stack of thin, printed rectangles. She spread them in one hand, showing me the little numbers and symbols.

“You've seen these before. Just not in meatspace.”

I picked one up. It bent between my fingers.

“People played games with these?”

“People still do.”

“Why?”

“Because sometimes the internet breaks, Geoff.”

I looked down at the card.

“Fair.”

We walked to the ground-floor lobby of our building. It had two couches, a dead plant, and a table that kept one corner from touching the floor. We sat at the table because it was the only surface big enough for cards.

Jamie shuffled. I watched her hands move the little rectangles around with a practiced ease I couldn't imagine ever learning. I thought, briefly, about animating it on the ones, just a floating pair of hands mixing up cards--

“Actually,” she said, noticing my slack jaw and wide eyes, “gin might be a bit much. Let's do Crazy Eights.”

“Is that better?”

She smiled. “It's stupider.”

“Excellent.”

She dealt us five cards each and explained the rules. Match the suit or the number; an eight could change the suit.

“There should be a better game,” I said.

Jamie tried to smile. “There are. We could learn one together.”

“While we wait for news? My brain can barely handle what’s going on.”

Jamie’s lips pursed. “Fair.”

She put down an eight and declared hearts. I followed with a heart. A minute later, I played the wrong rank and she made me take it back.

I protested. She hid a smile. Her legs touched mine. She didn’t shy away.

We played another round. Then another.

Every few turns one of us checked the status page. It had not changed.

I kept thinking about Vivian. About the last time I'd heard her voice in sim. About how she'd been so tired, even in the Zoo, and how she kept trying to make everyone else feel better.

Jamie caught me looking at my phone.

“Hey.”

I looked up.

“Your turn.”

I put down a card.

“That's a six,” she said.

“Yes.”

“We're playing on clubs.”

“Oh.”

She took the card and put it back in my hand.

“Geoff?”

“Yeah?”

“I'm scared too.”

I looked at her.

She gathered her cards into a neat little fan.

“I figured we could be scared together.”

We played another round.

Gemini's call came through on my private line. I stepped a few paces from the table and answered. No video link - Gemini hated being on video.

“Are you out?” she asked.

“We're out. Jamie's with me.”

“Cozy.” She tried to make it a joke. Nobody laughed.

I felt my face flushing. Pretty sure Jamie saw it too.

“We’re neighbors.”

Silence.

“Can you both come here? I have room. I'll send the address.”

“Is something wrong?”

A beat.

“I don't know enough to tell you, and I don't want to wait alone.”

“We'll come.”

I lowered my hand from my ear. Jamie was watching my face, her fingers still at my sleeve.

“Gemini?” she asked.

“She asked us to come over.”

Jamie gathered the cards.

“Gin rummy next time, then.”

I walked her to the garage where my moped awaited us.

Jamie

I followed Geoff out of the lobby. The call had given us a place to go, not an answer. I didn't ask what Gemini knew. Geoff had said she wanted us over, and that was enough. I had a hand on his sleeve again before we reached the street.

“Where are we going?”

He showed me the address.

I stared at it.

“That's a nice neighborhood.”

“Is it?”

“Geoff, that's a *very* nice neighborhood.”

“Oh.” He put his phone away. “Well, I have transportation.”

“You do?”

He smiled.

I should have been suspicious.

His moped occupied the back corner of the building's garage, wedged between a charging station and a collection of abandoned bicycles. It looked as though someone had assembled it from three different vehicles and then regretted the result.

One side panel was a different color from the rest. The seat had been repaired with silver tape. Something hung underneath it that I sincerely hoped wasn't important.

“That's yours?”

“Yep.”

“Does it work?”

“Mostly.”

“Geoff.”

“It's perfectly safe.”

He reached underneath the seat and pulled out a folded suit.

“Here. Refrigerated. You're going to want it.”

I unfolded it. The material was thicker than I expected, with little coolant channels running through the lining.

“This is yours?”

“Yeah. Might be a bit tight around the chest, but it should fit.”

I held it against myself.

“Bit tight?”

He glanced at me, then looked away.

“I mean, the measurements are probably close.”

“Geoff.”

“What?”

I smiled despite myself.

“Nothing.”

He helped me find the connections and showed me how to activate the cooling system. Cold spread across my back and down my arms. It felt wonderful.

“Okay,” I admitted. “I see why you have one.”

“Summer.”

“Right.”

“And spring.”

“Sure.”

“And sometimes fall.”

I looked at him.

“Geoff, do you ever go outside?”

“Not recreationally. Do you?”

I laughed. It surprised me. I'd spent the last hour convinced that Vivian was dying somewhere we couldn't reach, and suddenly I was laughing at Geoff in a parking garage.

He looked pleased with himself.

He got on the moped and motioned for me to climb on behind him.

“Hold tight.”

I settled onto the narrow seat. There wasn't much room for two people. My knees ended up on either side of his hips, and I had to put both arms around his waist to keep my balance.

“Oh,” I said.

“Yeah. It's a little small.”

“A little.”

He started the engine.

The moped made a noise like a kitchen appliance being murdered.

“Is it supposed to do that?”

“More or less.”

“*More or less?*”

He eased the throttle open.

The machine lurched forward, screamed in mechanical protest, and carried us up the garage ramp at a speed that suggested it was having second thoughts.

I tightened my arms around him.

“Geoff!”

“It's fine!”

“Your motorcycle sounds angry!”

“It's a moped!”

“It's angry!”

He laughed, and I felt it through his back.

I held on.

The city moved around us in a succession of gray buildings, wet pavement, and people going about their lives. I kept expecting something to announce the emergency. A warning on a public display. A siren. Someone stopping us to ask what had happened.

Nobody did.

The Zoo had gone down. Vivian might be dying. Somewhere, Jack was doing God knew what.

And people were buying groceries.

I leaned forward until my helmet nearly touched Geoff's.

“Isn't it weird?” I asked.

“What?”

“That everything's still happening.”

He didn't answer immediately.

Then he said, “Yeah.”

We stopped at a light. I loosened my grip, just a little.

I could feel his breathing through the suit. The warmth of him beneath the cooling fabric.

I'd spent so much time knowing Geoff as a mouse. His ears, his little hands, the way his face moved when he was concentrating on a painting.

The person in front of me was taller than his avatar. He had narrower shoulders than I'd expected, and the back of his neck was visible above his collar.

I wondered whether he knew how different he looked.

The light changed.

He accelerated, and I put my arms around him again.

I didn't loosen them at the next light.

The neighborhood changed before the address appeared.

The buildings grew farther apart. The sidewalks had trees. Actual trees, growing out of the ground in little squares of dirt instead of being displayed on walls or projected over concrete.

Then we turned onto a street lined with houses.

Houses.

Not apartments. Not subdivided buildings with a dozen families packed into spaces meant for three.

Single-family homes.

I stared at them as we passed.

“People live here?”

“Apparently.”

“Just one family?”

“I guess.”

“Jesus.”

Geoff slowed in front of a tall building set back behind a little garden of cacti. It had two stories, a porch, and windows large enough that I wondered how anyone afforded to heat the place.

He checked the address.

“This is it.”

I got off the moped and pulled at the suit, trying to straighten it.

“Are you sure?”

“That's what she sent.”

I looked up at the house again.

“What does Gemini *do*?”

“Something online.”

“Apparently something very online.”

He locked the moped. I wondered whether anyone in this neighborhood had ever seen one.

We walked up the path together.

Geoff knocked once.

I heard footsteps.

Then the door opened.

A woman stood in the doorway.

She was tall, with a narrow muzzle and long, expressive ears. Fine fur covered her face and the exposed skin of her arms, so thin in places that I could see the shape of the muscles underneath. Her hair fell around her ears, and behind her a long tail swept from side to side.

She wore a loose shirt and comfortable trousers.

Her mouth opened in a wide smile.

“Geoff! Jamie! Come in.”

I knew the voice before I let myself know the face.

The ears. The muzzle. The tail.

No.

No way.

“You're...”

She tilted her head.

“Wait. Holy shit.”

Geoff looked at me.

“Jamie?”

“*The* Goodgirl?”

The woman's smile changed. Not quite smaller. Just different.

“Oh,” she said.

“I've watched your streams.”

Which was true.

It was also nowhere near the whole truth.

I'd bought the braindances. More than once. I'd felt what it was like to be her, to experience the goodgirl flood from inside her own body.

And now she was standing in front of me.

“Oh my God.”

I looked at Geoff.

“Geoff, do you know who this is?”

He looked from me to her.

“Gemini?”

“That's *CancerCancer*.”

“Yes,” she said.

Her tail was still wagging.

“Among other things.”

I wanted the ground to swallow me.

CeeCee

Geoff knocked once. I had been waiting just inside the door.

He had Jamie with him. I knew her voice from the Zoo; in person, it came out a little thinner. Both of them were looking at me, but neither had come to look at me. That mattered. I had been looked at enough for a lifetime.

“Come in,” I said.

My duplex was nice. Too nice, really. Subscriber money had paid for most of it, and subscriber gifts had furnished the rest. I had two spare bedrooms, a long dining table, three terminals I kept ready for building work, and enough dog-themed furniture to make a pet store look restrained.

I had gotten used to saying the extra equipment was for guests. I still wanted it to be true.

Geoff put his coat over the back of a chair. Jamie stayed close to him, one hand around the strap of her bag.

Without their Zoo avatars, they looked almost undressed. Geoff was just a man in a sweater. Jamie had dark circles under her eyes and a little crease between her brows. I kept expecting to see something familiar in their silhouettes, some trace of the people I knew.

Meanwhile, my tail had been wagging since I opened the door. I couldn't seem to make it stop.

“Tea?” I asked.

“Yes,” Jamie said. “I mean, if you're making some. I don't want to be the person who arrives during the end of the world and makes you host.”

“Water's already on.”

“Then I would love some tea.”

I brought three mugs to the table. We sat without turning on the television or calling anyone. The status page stayed open between us. The last message had not changed.

Geoff refreshed it.

Nothing.

He put his phone face down.

“Sorry about the place,” I said.

Jamie looked around.

“What's wrong with it?”

“It's a little much.”

There was a dog bed beside the fireplace. Another under the window. Neither had ever been used by an actual dog. A framed portrait of CancerCancer hung over the mantel, wearing a collar I hadn't owned in three years.

“Perk of the job,” I said. “Lots of gifts from subscribers. And I have to throw parties here sometimes for my super subs. The house is my studio, so it's puppy this and doggie-bed that.”

“It's nice,” Geoff said.

He was looking at a water bowl with my name engraved on it.

“Hell, I can't even make cookies without them being dogbone shaped.”

Jamie looked at me.

“What's a cookie?”

I stared at her.

“A cookie.”

“Yeah.”

“You've never had a cookie?”

“I don't think so.”

Geoff shook his head. “I know what one is.”

“Thank you, Geoff.”

“I'm just saying.”

I looked from one to the other.

“Well, we'll have to fix that.”

I stood.

My tail caught the little table beside the sofa.

There was a crash.

The vase had been a gift from a subscriber. Hand-painted. Some sort of imported ceramic with a portrait of me on it, in a pose I didn't particularly want immortalized in pottery.

It lay in three large pieces and a dozen smaller ones.

Nobody moved.

“Oh, for fuck's sake.”

“Sorry,” Jamie said automatically.

“You didn't do anything.”

“I know, but—”

“It was ugly.”

Geoff looked at the pieces.

“It was definitely something.”

I started laughing.

I couldn't help it. I'd spent the last hour waiting for my phone to ring, and here I was, standing in a room full of expensive dog merchandise, laughing at a broken vase.

The laugh got away from me. It went on too long.

Jamie stood up.

“CeeCee?”

“I'm fine.”

I wasn't.

I crouched to pick up a piece of the vase. My hands were shaking badly enough that I dropped it again.

Geoff came over with a wastebasket.

“Here,” he said.

I let him take care of it.

“I'm sorry,” I said.

“For what?”

I looked around the room.

“All of this.”

He followed my gaze. The portraits. The furniture. The equipment. The ridiculous little ceramic dog beside the fireplace.

“You don't have to apologize for having a house.”

“It's not really a house. It's a studio. I live in it.”

Jamie came over and hugged me.

I hadn't expected it. One moment I was standing there with my hands hanging uselessly at my sides, and the next she had her arms around me. I put mine around her, carefully at first, then held on.

She was warm. Smaller than I remembered, too. Or maybe I was bigger. I'd never had to think about our relative heights before.

For a little while, neither of us said anything.

Then Jamie pulled back just enough to look at me.

“Can I say something really weird?”

I laughed against her shoulder.

“After today?”

“Fair.”

She hesitated.

“I always kinda wondered what you'd feel like in the flesh. You know, after dancing in your flesh and all that.”

I stared at her.

She winced.

“That sounded better in my head.”

“You've been wondering what I feel like?”

“Not like that! Well, not *only* like that. I mean, we spent all that time together in the Zoo, and I know what your avatar feels like, but that's not really the same thing, is it?”

“No,” I said.

She was still holding me.

I could feel her breathing. The pressure of her fingers against my back. The way she shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

It was different.

“I'm softer,” I said.

Jamie looked relieved.

“Yes! Exactly.”

“And warmer?”

“Definitely warmer.”

“My tail's real, too.”

“I noticed.”

“Nearly took your head off with it.”

“It took out your vase.”

“That vase had it coming.”

She laughed. A proper laugh this time, not the kind we'd all been forcing since she arrived.

I laughed too.

Then she hugged me again.

I held her tighter.

It was strange, being touched by a human stranger who already knew me so well. She knew my laugh, my temper, how I danced, how I liked to be held. But she'd never felt my actual heartbeat before.

I wondered whether she could feel how fast it was going.

When we finally let go, Jamie wiped at one eye with the heel of her hand.

“Sorry.”

“Don't.”

She nodded.

I rubbed my hands together.

“Anyway. Come on. I'll show you where I hide.”

“The what?”

“The sitting room.”

Geoff stopped sweeping.

“The what room?”

“The sitting room.”

Jamie looked at Geoff.

“Like, a room for sitting?”

“Yes.”

“What do you do in this room?”

I opened my mouth.

Closed it.

“Sit.”

Geoff considered that.

“Right.”

“It has normal furniture,” I added.

“Of course it does.”

“And no cameras.”

That made them both quiet.

“Come on,” I said. “I'll show you.”

The sitting room was at the back of the house. A little smaller than the other rooms, with a worn sofa, two armchairs, and shelves of books I actually liked. There was a blanket folded over the sofa arm. The walls were plain, and nothing in the room had ever been sent to me by a subscriber.

Jamie walked in first.

“Oh,” she said.

“What?”

“Nothing. It's lovely.”

Geoff sat down on the sofa.

“So this is where you hide.”

I sat in the chair opposite him.

“Sometimes.”

Jamie picked up the blanket, ran it between her fingers, and put it back.

For a while, we sat.

I could hear the refrigerator humming in the kitchen.

Geoff checked his phone.

I checked mine.

Jamie watched us check.

There was nothing.

I stood again.

“Cookies.”

“What?”

“I promised you cookies.”

“You don't have to,” Jamie said.

“I want to.”

I needed to do something with my hands.

My kitchen was enormous. It had been renovated for filming, with lights recessed into the ceiling and enough counter space for six people to work comfortably. There were three ovens. I had never used all three at once.

Jamie looked around.

“Do you cook?”

“On camera, sometimes.”

“What about when you're not on camera?”

I opened a drawer.

“I order food.”

There were twelve cookie cutters inside. Bones, paw prints, little dog heads. I moved them aside.

No circles.

Of course there weren't any circles.

I found a drinking glass in the cupboard and set it on the counter.

“What's that for?” Geoff asked.

“Cookies.”

“It's a glass.”

“Very observant.”

Jamie smiled.

I got out the flour, butter, sugar, and eggs. There was a recipe taped inside one of the cupboard doors, written in my own handwriting. I'd used it so many times on stream that I could probably have made the dough in my sleep.

For a few minutes, I explained what I was doing.

Then I realized I was explaining it in my streaming voice.

I stopped.

Jamie looked up from the bowl.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You were telling me about the butter.”

“Right.”

I handed her the spoon.

“Here. You try.”

She stirred carefully, watching the dough gather around the spoon.

“Like this?”

“Exactly.”

It was strange, teaching someone something without worrying whether the camera could see.

Geoff sat at the counter, occasionally offering advice nobody had asked for.

When the dough was ready, I rolled it out and handed Jamie the glass.

“Press straight down.”

She did.

A little circle of dough came free.

She held it up.

“That's a cookie?”

“Almost.”

She made another.

And another.

By the time the baking sheet was full, she'd gotten flour on her sleeve and was grinning at the neat rows of circles.

“Look at those,” Geoff said.

“Not bad for my first time.”

“Better than mine,” I said.

She laughed.

I put the tray in the oven.

Then there was nothing left to do.

I set the timer.

Eleven minutes.

Jamie checked her phone.

“Shit.”

Geoff looked up.

“Work?”

She nodded. “I need to call.”

“You can use the sitting room,” I said.

“Thanks. This should only take a second.”

She took her mug with her. A moment later, I heard her say, in a voice I hadn't heard from her before, “Hi. I'm sorry about the short notice.”

Geoff was looking at the doorway.

“Want to see the studio?” I asked.

He turned back to me. “Sure.”

I took him down the hall.

The lights came on when I opened the door. I'd forgotten to turn off the automatic setup. Warm light across the recording space, cooler light behind it. The monitors woke one after another.

“Jesus,” Geoff said.

“Yeah.”

“Does all of that happen every time you walk in?”

“Unless I remember to stop it.”

I reached for the wall panel and shut down everything except the overhead light.

Without the lighting, the room looked untidy. Cables ran under the desk. A half-empty bottle of water stood beside a brush full of my fur. There was a laundry basket just outside the cameras' field of view.

Geoff stopped beside the main monitor.

“You do the editing here?”

“Some of it.”

He leaned closer to the screen, then caught himself.

“Sorry. May I?”

“Go ahead.”

He sat. I brought up a finished project and let him move through the timeline. He scrubbed back over one of the transitions.

“You made that?”

“The room?”

“Yeah.”

“Most of it. Some purchased assets.”

He played the transition again.

“I like what the light does here.”

I leaned over his shoulder. “That took fucking hours.”

“It shows.”

From the sitting room, Jamie said, “No. I understand. That's why I'm calling you.”

Geoff's hand stopped on the mouse.

We waited.

“I can't come in. There's been a family emergency.”

He looked back at the monitor. I stayed beside him.

After a while, I said, “You missed the competition.”

“I know.”

“Your painting was good.”

“I know.”

He rubbed at a mark on the edge of the desk with his thumb.

“I had a lot going on.”

“I wasn't telling you off.”

“I know. Sorry.”

I pulled the other chair over and sat.

“You could still show it.”

“The deadline's gone.”

“Somewhere else. I know a place.”

He looked at me.

“A gallery?”

“Yes, Geoff. A gallery.”

“I thought you might mean a wall.”

“I have walls too.”

That got a little smile out of him.

In the other room, Jamie said, “She's family.”

The smile went away.

“No, we aren't related.”

I could hear the refrigerator from here. The fan in the terminal. Jamie took a breath.

“I don't know what you want me to—she might be dying.”

Geoff started to get up. I moved my chair out of his way, but he stopped with one hand on the desk.

“No. I heard you.”

A pause.

“I could call again in an hour. If we hear something, I could—”

She stopped.

Geoff watched the doorway.

Then Jamie said, “I'm not coming in.”

We heard nothing for long enough that I thought the call had ended.

“Then I quit.”

Her voice hadn't gotten louder.

“Yes.”

Another pause.

“I understand.”

Geoff was already in the hall when she came out.

She still had the mug. She looked down at it, then held it out to me.

“Can you take this?”

I took it. Her fingers stayed curled around the shape of the handle for a moment.

“I think I just quit.”

Geoff put a hand on her arm.

“What did they say?”

“That I had to come in.”

She rubbed her palms down the sides of her trousers.

“They said it wasn't a family emergency.”

“Jamie—”

“I know.”

She looked at her phone.

“I should have just said I was sick.”

Neither of us answered.

“I could call back.”

Geoff's hand slid down her arm until he was holding hers.

She let him take the phone out of her other hand. Then she reached for it again.

“I need to check when I get paid.”

He gave it back.

She opened something, stared at it, closed it.

“I don't know why I said that.”

“You told them you couldn't come in,” he said.

“I know what I told them.”

He nodded.

She pressed the heel of her hand against one eye.

“Sorry.”

The oven timer went off.

All three of us jumped.

“Oh, fuck. The cookies.”

I hurried into the kitchen. Behind me, Geoff asked Jamie something too quietly for me to hear.

The tray had caught on the oven rack. I tugged it free, nearly lost the oven mitt, and set it down harder than I meant to.

Jamie came in while I was finding the cooling rack. Geoff followed her.

“Are they okay?” she asked.

“A little brown at the edges.”

She stood beside me and looked at the tray.

“I made those.”

“You did.”

I worked the spatula under the first cookie. It folded in half.

“Shit.”

Jamie held out her hand.

“Let me try.”

I gave her the spatula.

Geoff checked his phone.

I watched his face.

He shook his head.

“Nothing.”

“Right.”

Jamie leaned against the counter.

“Maybe we should call.”

“Jack said he'd let us know,” Geoff said.

“He's got enough to do,” I added.

We all knew that.

I looked at the oven.

Ten minutes.

“I don't think I could stand it,” I said.

Neither of them answered.

“Being in there when the server went down.”

Jamie folded her arms.

“She's tough.”

“I know.”

“Really tough.”

“I know.”

Geoff put his phone down.

“She's got Jack.”

“And Ana,” Jamie said. "And all of the Kats."

I nodded.

Nine minutes.

Nobody said anything else about Vivian.

Geoff

Jamie wrapped both hands around her mug. I sat close enough that our shoulders touched. She didn't move away.

The room smelled like toasted leaves and the soap CeeCee used on the mug. Ordinary details were a kind of railing. I noticed all of them.

We talked about the ride over. The rain that had started and stopped without deciding what it was doing. The kettle. My painting. Jamie asked if I had eaten; I asked if she had. We both hadn’t. Nobody could think about dinner.

At some point, Jamie's fingers found the cuff of my sleeve and held it. I let her. CeeCee was across from us, her paws resting on the table. She kept her phone face down. No updates came from it.

I knew CeeCee was Gemini, and that Gemini was CancerCancer. She had trusted me with the seam between those names. I didn't say any of them. They belonged to her, and the person sitting with us was CeeCee.

Jamie looked at her once, then again. Something had clicked into place.

CeeCee

The cookies came out a little uneven. I'd rolled some of the dough too thin, and the edges had browned more than I wanted.

I put them on a rack to cool.

Jamie reached for one.

“Careful. Hot.”

She pulled her hand back.

“How long?”

“A minute.”

She waited.

Thirty seconds later, she reached again.

I gave up and handed her one.

She broke it in half, blew on it, and took a bite.

I watched her.

She chewed.

Her eyebrows went up.

“Oh.”

“What?”

She took another bite.

“That's good.”

“Yeah?”

“Really good.”

I felt my throat tighten.

“It's just a sugar cookie.”

“Well, it's a very good sugar cookie.”

Geoff took one.

“She's right.”

I looked down at the tray.

They weren't even shaped like bones.

I took one for myself.

It tasted like butter and sugar and something I'd made a thousand times before. Nothing special.

Jamie reached for another.

I pushed the tray toward her.

Then Geoff's phone lit up.

All three of us stopped.

He picked it up.

Read the message.

His expression didn't change.

“What?” I asked.

He turned the screen toward us.

A shipping notification.

Something he'd ordered three days ago.

“Oh,” I said.

He put the phone down.

Jamie finished her cookie.

“Can I have another?”

“Of course.”

I handed her one.

Then another for Geoff.

We ate them standing around the kitchen counter, with the oven cooling behind us and the status page still open on my phone.

Nobody suggested turning on the television.

Nobody wanted to go home.

And nobody had heard from Jack.

Jamie had used the braindances. My parents' platform had sold them. The body's genuine experience had been the product, and she had been on the other end of it, feeling what my body felt while I stepped back from it. There was an intimacy there. There was also distance. She had not been in my home; I had not known her name. Both facts could be true.

I didn't need her to apologize for having entered something sold in my name. I didn't need to perform ease so that she would stop worrying. “Lots of people have” was the truth. “I like to share” was also the truth, though neither sentence could carry the whole of it.

Geoff's arm was along the back of Jamie's chair. Jamie leaned into it. The three mugs cooled between us.

We waited.

The silence changed texture several times. Once it was all three of us listening for a phone. Later, it was Jamie rubbing the seam of Geoff's sleeve between her fingers. Then it was my thumb tracing a chip in the table's varnish. No message came.

I wanted to ask whether they were afraid. I knew they were. I wanted to say I was, too. I let my hand rest palm-up on the table instead.

Jamie put two fingers against my wrist. Geoff covered her free hand with his. No one promised anything. We stayed like that until Jamie's phone buzzed against the table.

Geoff

The notification was small. We all turned toward it.

Jamie read it once, then again. “It's from Jack. He sent it to us.”

She passed the phone to me. The message was short.

Viv's alive. I can't explain yet. —Jack

No word about the Zoo or the kids. No promise that Vivian was well. Just two words about her, sent by the person who knew.

Jamie reached for my hand. I was already holding hers.

“She’s alive,” CeeCee said.

“She’s alive,” I repeated.

It was the first thing we had learned. We didn't make it stand for more than it said.

Jamie

My thumb found the Zoo login before I had decided to move. Geoff's did the same on his phone. The connection failed at the same gray screen we'd been staring at all night.

“Can we get in?” I asked. “Like, *in* in."

CeeCee looked at us, then at the terminals in the other room. “I have guest rigs. High-quality ones. If the Zoo will take a connection, we can try from there.”

None of us wanted to make the first move. Moving meant learning what happened, good or bad. In the moment we were just a guy, a girl, and a dog sipping tea and keeping each other company.

Gemini stood and held out a hand to me. I took it. Geoff came up beside us, still close enough that our shoulders touched.

“Come on,” she said. “We'll try together.”