

Gallery View — Part 6: Stack Trace

By Austen Tucker · 2026

Stack Trace

I waited in the rafters and panicked.

The plan had been soup for an hour. Sprig had drifted off the way Sprig drifts — not gone, just elsewhere, a respectful distance with a hot mug. The lobby murmured its lobby murmur. Patrons did patron things. The koi postcard hung over the door on a length of fishing line, knotted to a trip-cue I'd rigged into the doorframe. My claws were in the wood and my chest was somewhere lower than my chest usually went.

Then three knocks came at the door, and I knew.

The koi dropped.

Jamie entered. She spotted it, grinned, followed the arrow. She laughed — bright, startled, delighted. The sound hit me like lightning. Laughter meant attention. Attention burned.

I bolted.

Two rafters over. Tucked into the shadow of a duct.

Across the floor, Vivian looked up at me and smiled. The harness pulsed once at my temple.

it's going well.

I clung harder to the beam.

Jamie was already moving. She found the koi under the vent — 1 of 8 — and tucked it into a pocket I had not known sharks had. She found the chalk arrow on the rafter. She found the busted cabinet at the center of the lobby, LOOK UP flashing in hot pink across its marquee, and she did not look up. She walked right to it.

She pointed at the machine, incredulous.

"This cabinet wasn't here before, right?"

The cabinet answered. I had recorded it the night before, for exactly this. It was my voice if you knew my voice and a stranger's voice if you didn't.

"That's how it works here. Expect change, because consistency is boring."

She put in a quarter.

She played the game I designed. A koi, a current, a small purple shark you steered by tilting your head. She tilted. She won. The console opened with a small ceremonial click and offered up a little bottle.

DRINK ME, the bottle said.

She shrank.

From sixty stories of rafter perspective, she went from shark to mouse-sized shark, fins to the floor, a small thing now, the right scale for the door I had cut into the side of the cabinet — a mousehole flush with the baseboard, lit a friendly green.

She saw it. She crouched. She stepped inside.

Inside, she stopped.

I had spent two weeks on this room. The inside of a thought, was what I'd told the crew when they asked what I was building. They had nodded politely and built it anyway. Capacitors as redwoods. Resistor coils switchbacking up the trunks like trails on a mountainside. Solder hills with copper traces glowing under her feet like rivers seen from a plane. An LED rain that hung in the air and refused to fall, because falling was the easy version and this was a chapter about staying.

I had told myself nobody would ever see it.

Jamie saw it.

She took one step. Then she took another, slower. She knelt and put a clawed finger on a glowing trace and watched it pulse against her skin. She tilted her head back to look at the rain that wasn't falling. She walked, not ran, not laughed — walked, the way you walk in a cathedral when you have just remembered that cathedrals are also rooms.

From the rafters I had to grip the beam hard enough to feel the wood splinter, because what I felt was the specific terror of being recognized. Not seen — recognized. The difference between the eyes of a passerby and the eyes of someone who knows the trick because they once tried it and failed.

She murmured something I could not hear. She kept walking.

She was getting closer. She was getting closer.

And then the sim broke. Some sort of for loop I forgot to protect.

The tunnel spat her out at the studio threshold faster than I had built it to, and her tail — that brand-new, badly-controlled, glorious shark tail — caught the edge of a stack of canvases on her way in. They went down like dominoes. Acrylics and primitives sprayed across the floor. Splattered spheres flew everywhere.

I yelped. From the rafters. Before I could stop myself.

Then I dropped from the vent, landed on a paint tray, and splattered purple across the floor. More canvases toppled. The crew, who had been pretending not to be there, were definitely not there now.

We met in the wreckage.

She was on her knees in a slick of cyan, one paint-handled brush tangled in her dorsal fin. I was sitting in a puddle of purple holding the wrong end of a palette knife. Above us, somewhere, my entire studio was unspooling its consequences.

"I'm sorry," I said, more reflex than anything conscious.

"You made the picture, didn't you?"

I opened my mouth.

For the first time inside the studio, in front of a person who was not made of helper-agents and good intentions, my mouth worked.

"I did, yeah."

She nodded slowly. Stood up. Brushed cyan off her knees. Then she walked past the toppled canvases like a person who had remembered they were in a gallery, not a wreck. She stopped at a piece I had not meant to show her — had not meant to show anyone, really — and her shoulders did the thing again. She stared. Some combination of recognition and awe.

"This would rule."

"It's, uh."

"This would rule."

"It's about illegal acts."

She didn't look away from the painted door. "I know what it's about."

A beat.

"People wait too long for legal. Some don't make it."

I opened my mouth. Closed it.

THE LIGHT UNDER THE DOOR, the canvas read, in the same fading ink as a march flyer. A hundred faceless people walking through an open glass door into a server farm and coming out the other side as light. Above the door, hand-lettered in hot pink: LET US OUT.

She tapped the slogan with a clawed finger. Looked at it. Tilted her head. Looked back at me. The lit-up expression came over her face the way it had in the lobby when she figured out the noodle machine — that I have just put together a thing face.

"...your voice," she said. "From the cabinet. Same voice. And the slogan — same letters as the button that delivery boy was wearing on his satchel. Holy moley, you're—"

"Delivery boy," I said, because if she was going to say it I wanted my voice to be the one that landed it. "Yeah."

"We're neighbors."

I clicked my heels once, twice. This was a mistake.

Then a ping: Vivian. "If you leave, mouse, so help me—"

She noticed.

"Vivian in your ear too?"

We laughed — together this time.

"Well, I may have messed up your little meet-cute," she continued, pointing to the wreckage of my workshop. "But your work. It's... stunning."

She walked the room. Stopped at a piece. Tilted her head.

"Why didn't you show anyone this?"

I opened my mouth. The studio held its breath. The crew, who were definitely not there, were definitely not there harder.

"I don't... I'm not..."

"You don't have to answer that," she said quickly. "Sorry. Wrong angle."

She traced a brushstroke with a clawed finger. "You layered cyan over crimson to get that fade. Nobody does that on paper.

"Also, you gotta tell me how you handled scale with that drink. Totally trippy. Did you add tilt shift to my shader?"

I stood there, blinking, the words not wanting to come out. She'd seen the trick.

"You know your way around sims?" I asked.

"I work in one," Jamie said. She waved the question away and looked like she was swimming while doing so. "I get bored. Pick at the source code sometimes. But I've never made one."

"You should," I said.

She shook her head. "I wouldn't even know where to start."

The words came out of me before the fear could catch up. "I could teach you." My tail whipped back and forth, somewhere between joy and terror.

Query.

Gods, not now.

Cardiac spike. Permission to deploy cover?

I couldn't speak. I nodded once, hard, hoping she could read it off the eye-track.

Granted. Deployed. Pete is watching a render of you eating noodles with both hands. Try not to spike again for fifteen.

The world steadied. The Zoo held. The purple shark was still in front of me, still expectant, still here. The harness had bought me the seconds I needed to keep my body in the cube and my mouse on the floor.

Have fun, mouse.

"You're gonna submit this to the competition, right?" She waved her hand in the air, trying to think. "That famous catgirl artist, right?"

I blushed. "CancerCancer, yes."

"Deadline's coming up," she said, tapping her temple. "Vivian told me."

"I know." I paced around the shop and ran my finger over the canvases, considering. "But the arcade one's not good enough for her." I kicked at the floorboards. "I made it for you anyway. Would be weird to double-dip."

"Then submit something else."

"How do you know I have anything else?"

She laughed, turned, and opened her arms to encompass the workshop. I hadn't noticed before, but she had fins instead of hair, which should have been strange but it looked good on her.

"You made that fetch quest for me in what, three days? Folks with that kind of talent create like, well." She snorted. "Like sharks breathe water."

"I don't know—"

"You built a cathedral inside a busted arcade cabinet for me," she said. "Don't make me the only one who gets to see it."

I looked to the ground. "Working on it."

She put a hand on my shoulder.

"So will I."