

JACK.

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It was night.

Not any kind of remarkable night, but something new was being carried in on its numbing wind. It pushed the bushes aside and elbowed its way through the trees, stating, rather arrogantly, that it did exist, and that it was a change, and that it should be paid attention to. Very vague at first, it was a reminder of the town and its chimneys and its asphalt streets, but after a while, it started to grow stronger. Thicker. In some universe somewhere, it could have been given a name, like a smell: ambrosial, loud - just noisome, maybe - but for the boy running through the woods at eleven-thirty at night it was just redolent. It smelled like something: probably pine.

It was well past time for bed and mother would come out calling him again soon, but he was far too caught up in the night's adventure to hear, or to care if he did hear. Old Jack ran much faster than the boy did, so he got to pick where they went, nose to the ground and tail wagging like helicopter propellers ready for take-off. He stopped every now and again, atop a rock or log, to look back at his clumsy two-legged friend, tongue tasting what his nose missed in the air. He barked. The boy shushed him hurriedly; the neighbours always came over when he barked.

During the day, the forest was green and brown and sheltered, and it smiled with a golden sort of light, but now all the trees were black, rigid silhouettes against an even blacker background, and they only swayed when they were pushed. When they were pushed, the boy ducked behind the nearest cover, a bush or a boulder, and held his breath waiting, waiting. Even as his heart beat that little bit faster, he couldn't help the smile on his lips. He stayed impressively quiet until the seeker's turn was over.

When it was his turn, he went springing off again. A rotted old fence marked the real edge of town - he'd been told it was the new one just outside his garden, but he knew better. It used to be tall enough to keep deer out, but a few years ago it'd been wiped out during a storm that nearly flooded all the houses and since, he'd been told quite adamantly not to explore so far out. With a quick glance over his shoulder for swaying trees or headlamps, he scrambled over the remnants and looked up at the steepening ground ahead.

Jack had more trouble getting over. He stuck his nose into the gaps like he could fit through, but he was far too big for that. The boy told him as much and patted his legs to encourage him over. Jack whined back at him. It took a fair bit of compromise, but eventually he managed to haul him over by the scruff of his neck, one leg braced against the most solid piece of wood he could find and the other a lever wedged firmly in the dirt like he'd seen his father do. When Jack went over, they both fell back into the pine needle covered soil and the boy had to clamp a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing. He scratched Jack's ear and took off climbing before the seeker could catch him up.

Each step up the earthy bank landed him right back where he started. He copied Jack, down on all fours, grabbing at roots to pull himself up. Sometimes whole chunks of the ground came up when he leant on it and he had to angle his slide towards one of the trees to stop before he went too far down. The trees never shifted when he touched them, but the amount of dirt in his mouth made him forget the game of hide and seek.

Then, all at once, the ground levelled out.

He stood up and peered down the bank, at least three times his height, and kicked a moss ball down it in slanderous victory. Somewhere around the hilltop was a cliff that overlooked the town. One sunny Sunday afternoon, he'd overheard a flock of ruffled parents talking about their kids running up there while they should've been in church, and how it had become such a menace and had gestured and sighed, and then his mother had pulled him away by the collar of his nicest shirt. So it was somewhere around, but the where was another matter entirely. Not that it was any cause for trepidation; the boy took off again, looking as much for beetles under rocks and in the rotted logs as he did for the ledge. Even as he did, though, the air started to lose its edge - and when he looked to Jack, there was the faintest outline of a shadowy dog on the ground beside him. And - yes, he could see it now - a hazy kind of light striped by the silhouettes of the trees like the tigers that paced about the zoo. With every heel-to-toe step he took, it grew hotter, brighter, more brilliant - and all about him, the trees' shadows were thrown back into the jaws of the thing that had been nipping at him just before. He gave the shifting orange a small, sole applause in thanks—

--And it kept on brightening.

So much so that he couldn't tell where the forest ended and the town started. He searched for the mosaic of firefly windows that usually flickered to life so late at night, but if it had been

there at all, the tiger had chased it away too. No matter how he held his hand in front of his eyes, he couldn't shield them from the glow enough to see the opposite hill all the houses were spread out on - from where its base would have been was either bright orange or the thick, swirling stripes, all the way to the sky. He thought he'd seen stars appearing through the gaps in the leaves earlier, but there wasn't a single one above him now, and even as far away from it as he was, it warmed him.

It was a better kind of breath than the one people marvelled about taking on a cold morning after rain. The air tasted different under the new light, fuller, and as much as it hurt to look at, not a second passed where he thought of turning away from it. He'd found the ledge that took him as close to it as possible, and he closed his eyes there, smiled; he thought, for the first time since he let another tiger into his room and watched its shadow climb into Jack's bed, that there was a point in words like beautiful. In that semi-dark, he reached down to place a hand on Jack - but his hand just brushed the air. Half-opening his eyes, the boy called out clumsily through a drunken smile, not quite distracted enough to twist away. It was comforting: the forest would eat his footprints and the tiger would eat the sky, and he would wander off again with Jack, and nothing would be left behind. But Jack still wasn't there.

He wasn't looking over the edge anymore. He called back into the forest over and over, quietly at first so he didn't give his spot away, but gradually louder. The games were forgotten as his small voice grew shaky, shrill shouting over the trees, and when he fell silent, he heard all the things he hadn't been listening for. He heard the sirens wailing from the bottom of the valley, mourning the blaze louder than anyone ever dared to mourn loss. He heard echoing shouts, and the far-away moaning from houses that were forgetting how to stand. He heard his own cries, but multiplied a thousand times and carried to him on the same wind as smoke and the smell of burning pine as the tiger's shadow climbed higher. And he'd done it again - he'd left Jack behind. Too far behind for his whistle to carry. Where did dogs go, when they didn't come with a call?

His hand hurt. It was balled up too tightly in his pocket, but when he forced it open to wipe his eyes, the fingers smelt too strongly of gasoline. They smelt too strongly of nights that were unremarkable in everyone's sense but his own, and that followed him about turn-by-turn in the dark. They smelt too strongly of Jack.