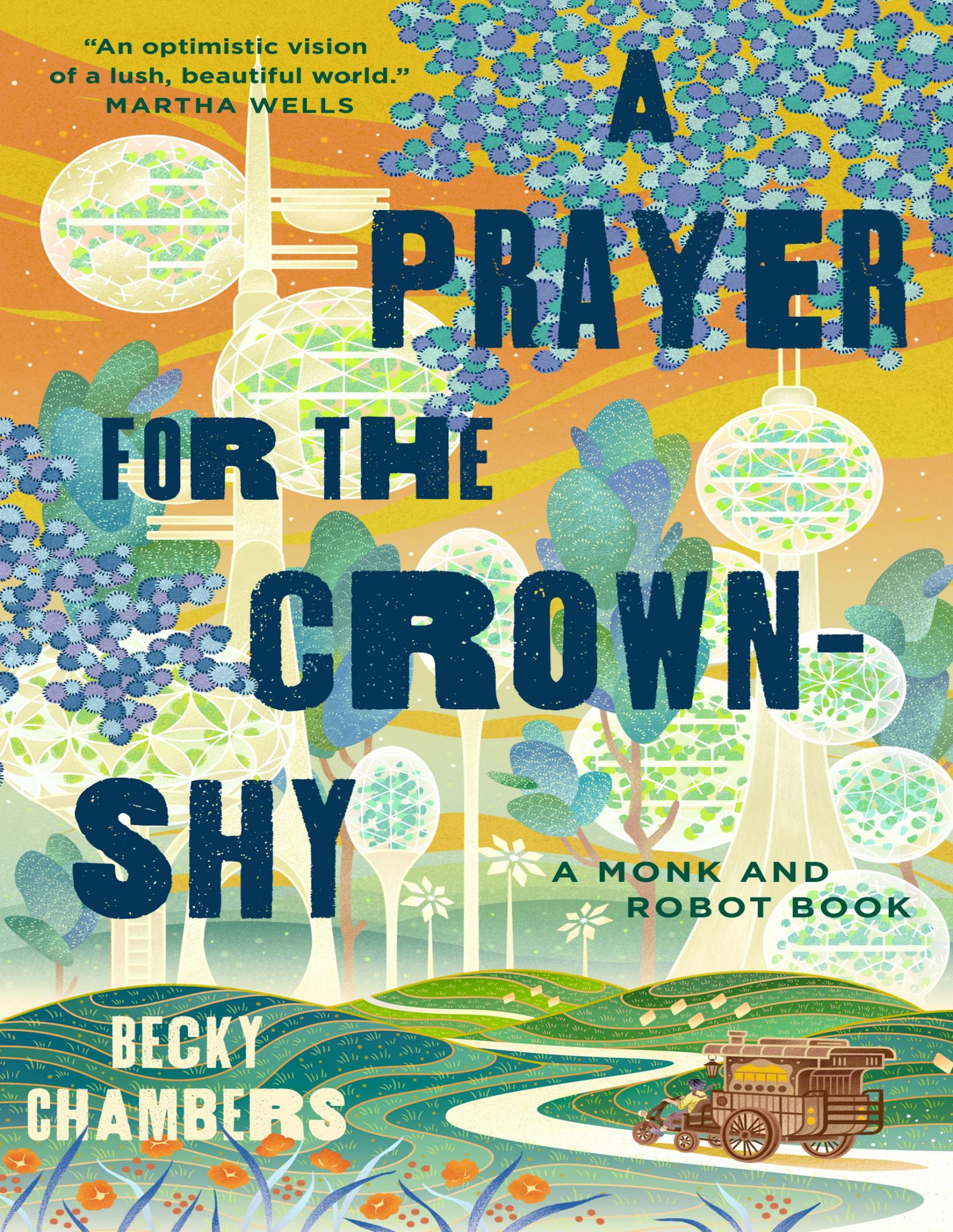


**“An optimistic vision
of a lush, beautiful world.”**

MARTHA WELLS



A PRAYER FOR THE CROWN- SHY

**A MONK AND
ROBOT BOOK**

**BECKY
CHAMBERS**

**A
PRAYER
FOR THE
CROWN-SHY**



**BECKY
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For anybody who doesn't know where they're going

Praise to the Parents.
Praise to Trikilli, of the Threads.
Praise to Grylom, of the Inanimate.
Praise to Bosh, of the Cycle.

Praise to their Children.
Praise to Chal, of Constructs.
Praise to Samafar, of Mysteries.
Praise to Allalae, of Small Comforts.

They do not speak, yet we know them.
They do not think, yet we mind them.
They are not as we are.
We are of them.

We are the work of the Parents.
We do the work of the Children.
Without use of constructs, you will unravel few mysteries.
Without knowledge of mysteries, your constructs will fail.
Find the strength to pursue both, for these are our prayers.
And to that end, welcome comfort, for without it, you cannot stay
strong.

—From *The Insights of the Six*,
West Buckland Edition

1

THE HIGHWAY

The thing about fucking off to the woods is that unless you are a very particular, very rare sort of person, it does not take long to understand why people left said woods in the first place. Houses were invented for excellent reasons, as were shoes, plumbing, pillows, heaters, washing machines, paint, lamps, soap, refrigeration, and all the other countless trappings humans struggle to imagine life without. It had been important—vitaly important—for Sibling Dex to see their world as it was without such constructs, to understand on a visceral level that there was infinitely more to life than what happened between walls, that every person was indeed just an animal in clothing, subject to the laws of nature and the whims of chance like everything else that had ever lived and died in the universe. But the moment they pedaled their wagon out of the wilderness and onto the highway, Dex felt the indescribable relief of switching back to the flip side of that equation—the side in which humans had made existence as comfortable as technology would sustainably allow. The wheels of Dex’s ox-bike no longer caught on the broken crags of old oil road. Their heavily laden double-decker wagon no longer shuddered as they willed it across chaotic surfaces rent by the march of roots and the meandering of soil. There were no creeping branches catching their clothing, no fallen trees posing problems, no unlabeled forks that made them stop and stare with dread. Instead, there was cream-colored paving, smooth as butter and just as warm, lined with signs people made to let other people know which way to go if they wanted to rest and eat and not be alone.

Not that Sibling Dex was alone, of course. Mosschap walked alongside them, its tireless mechanical legs easily keeping pace with the bike. “It’s so ... manicured,” the robot said with wonder as it studied the seam

between road and forest. “I knew it would be, but I’ve never seen it for myself.”

Dex glanced at the dense ferns and web-laced wildflowers spilling over the edge of the road, barely held back by the highway’s border. If *this* was what passed as *manicured*, they couldn’t imagine what Mosschap was going to make of, say, a rose garden, or a public park.

“Oh, and look at this!” Mosschap hurried ahead of the ox-bike, clanking with every step. It stopped before a road sign, placing its hinged hands on its matte-silver hips as it read the text to itself. “I’ve never seen a sign this legible before,” it called back. “And it’s so *glossy*.”

“Yeah, well, we’re not in a ruin,” Dex said, panting lightly as they crested the last of a mild incline. They wondered if Mosschap was going to be like this with *every* human-made object it encountered. But then again, perhaps it was a good thing for someone to appreciate the craftsmanship of a backroads highway or a quick-printed road sign. The creation of such objects took just as much work and thought as anything else, yet garnered little praise from those who saw them every day. Maybe giving such things credit where credit was due was the perfect job for someone who wasn’t a person at all.

Mosschap turned to Dex with as big a smile as its boxy metal face would allow. “This is very nice,” it said, pointing a finger at the text reading STUMP —20 MILES. “Wonderfully neat. Though a little prescriptive, don’t you think?”

“How so?”

“Well, there’s no spontaneity in your journey, then, is there? If you’re focused on moving from sign to sign, there’s no opportunity for happy accidents. But I suppose I’ve rarely had clear destinations in mind before now. In the wilds, I simply *go places*.”

“Most folks don’t wander between towns without a concrete reason for doing so.”

“Why not?” Mosschap asked.

Dex had never really thought about this before. They steered the bike in the direction the sign indicated, and Mosschap fell into step alongside. “If you have everything you need around you,” Dex said, “there’s no reason to leave. It takes a lot of time and effort to go someplace else.”

Mosscap nodded at the wagon trailing dutifully behind Dex's ox-bike. "Would you say this carries everything you need?"

The phrasing of this was not lost on Dex. *What do humans need?* was the impossible question that had driven Mosscap to wander out of the wilderness on behalf of robot-kind, and Dex had no idea how Mosscap was ever going to find a satisfactory answer. They knew they'd be hearing the question endlessly during however long it took them both to travel together through Panga's human territories, but apparently, Mosscap was starting now.

"Materially, yeah, pretty much," Dex answered, in regards to the wagon. "At least, in an everyday sense."

The robot craned its head, looking at the storage crates tied to the roof of the vehicle that rattled with the internal shifting of yet more things. "I suppose I might not want to travel much if it required taking all of *this* with me."

"You can get by with less, but you gotta know where you're going," Dex said. "You need to know there's food and shelter where you're headed. Which is exactly why we make signs." They gave Mosscap a knowing glance. "Otherwise, you end up spending the night in a cave."

Mosscap gave Dex a sympathetic nod. The hard climb to Hart's Brow was more than a week behind them, but Dex's body was still feeling it, and they had made no secret of this. "On that note, Sibling Dex," Mosscap said, "I can't help but notice that the sign says it's another twenty miles to Stump, and—"

"Yeah, day's getting late," Dex agreed. Twenty miles wasn't so bad, but creamy highway or not, they were still deep in forest and had yet to see anyone else on the road. There was no reason beyond impatience to continue pressing on in the dark, and though Dex was looking forward to being in a proper town again, stillness and rest sounded preferable in the moment.

They pulled off the road at a simple clearing built for that exact purpose, and together, Dex and Mosscap made camp. The two of them had fallen into an unspoken rhythm with this in recent days. Dex locked down everything with wheels, Mosscap unfolded the kitchen on the wagon's exterior, Dex fetched chairs, Mosscap started the fire. There was no discussion around it anymore.

As Mosschap fussed with connecting the biogas tank to the fire drum, Dex pulled out their pocket computer and opened their mailbox. “Whoa,” they said.

“What is it?” Mosschap asked as it secured the metal hose to the gas tank’s valve.

Dex flicked through message after message after message. Never in their life had they gotten this much mail. “A lot of people want to meet you,” they said. This wasn’t entirely unexpected. The moment Dex had regained satellite signal after climbing back down the mountain, they’d sent messages to the village councils, the Wildguard, the monastic network, and every other contact they could think of. The first robot to reach out to humans since the Awakening wasn’t something to be kept secret or left a surprise, Dex felt. Mosschap had come to meet humanity as a whole; that was who Dex had informed.

It made sense, Dex supposed, that everyone had written back.

“We’ve got a lot of invites from the City,” Dex said. They leaned against the wagon’s outer wall as they skimmed through. “Um ... the University, obviously, and the City History Museum, and—oh, shit.” They raised their eyebrows.

Mosschap pulled its chair up beside the unlit fire drum and sat down. “What?”

“They want to do a convergence,” Dex said.

“What’s that?”

“Uh, it’s a formal gathering where all the monks come together at the All-Six for a few days for a...” Dex gestured vaguely. “You know, there’s a ceremony, and talks, and ... it’s a big deal.” They scratched their ear as they read over the gushing message. “We don’t do those very often.”

“I see,” Mosschap said, but its voice was distracted, and it wasn’t looking their way at all. “Not that I don’t care, Sibling Dex, but—”

“Yep,” Dex said with a nod, knowing what was coming next. “Do your thing.”

Mosschap leaned in toward the fire drum, as close as was safe, its glowing eyes fixed on the apparatus within. It flicked the switch on the side of the drum, and with a soft *whoosh*, the fire leapt to life. “Ha!” Mosschap said delightedly. “Oh, it’s wonderful, it really is.” It sat back in its chair, folding

its hands in its lap as it watched the flames dance. “I don’t think I’ll ever tire of this.”

The arrival of warmth and light was the casual signal that the campsite was finally in order, and Dex decided the messages could wait. They put their computer away and, at long last, did what they’d spent hours longing to do. They shed their dirty, sweat-soaked, forest-flecked clothes, set up the camp shower, turned the water on, and stepped into the spray.

“Gods around,” they moaned. Dried salt and accumulated trail dust veritably peeled from their skin, running in grubby spirals into the greywater catch. The clean water stung as it hit scrapes still healing, and soothed the constellations of insect bites Dex had been scratching despite their best efforts. The water pressure was nothing more than decent, and the temperature was only as hot as the wagon’s solar coating could coax from deep-forest sunlight, but even so, it felt to Dex like the finest luxury in the world. They leaned their head back, letting the water run through their hair as they stared at the sky above the trees. Stars were breaking through the pinkish-blue, and Motan’s curved stripes hung high, smiling reassuringly down at the moon Dex called home.

Mosscap stuck its head around the corner of the wagon. “Would you like me to make food while you bathe?” it asked.

“You really don’t have to,” Dex said. They were still warring with their personal discomfort over letting the robot do tasks of this sort, despite the fact that Mosscap loved few things more than learning how to *use stuff*.

“Of course I don’t *have to*,” Mosscap scoffed, clearly finding Dex’s reluctance on this front ridiculous. It held up a dehydrated pack of three-bean stew. “Would this be a good meal?” it asked.

“That...” Dex relented. “That would be perfect,” they said. “Thanks.”

Mosscap got the stove going, and Sibling Dex prayed silently to the god they’d devoted themselves to. Praise Allalae for showers. Praise Allalae for sweet mint soap that lathered up thick as meringue. Praise Allalae for the tube of anti-itch cream they were going to slather themselves with once they’d dried off. Praise Allalae for—

They pursed their lips, realizing they’d forgotten to fetch their towel before getting in the shower. They threw an eye toward the hook on the side of the wagon where it should have been hanging. To their surprise, the

towel was there, right where it should be. Mosschap must've brought it, they thought, when it went to search the pantry.

Dex gave a small, grateful smile.

Praise Allalae for the company.

2

THE WOODLANDS

The trees the village was tucked within were deceptively young. They towered majestically over the road, taller than any building outside the City, their layered branches creating a dappled lace of sunlight. But the age of a Kesken pine was expressed not in height but width. The early years of saplings were spent exhausting every calorie sucked from both light and dirt on building themselves upward, trying to escape the shade of the lower forest for the brightness above. It was only after they'd spent years converting unfiltered sun into life-giving sugar that they began to expand horizontally, transforming into behemoths as the centuries drummed on. By their species's standards, the trees in the place that Dex and Mosschap had entered were slim teenagers, less than two hundred years old.

There was only one reminder of the giants that had once stood in this forest (and would again, one day). Dex stopped the wagon and hopped off their bike as they approached the village's namesake: an enormous stump, wide as a modest house, its spiring might cut clean away in the early days of the Factory Age, a time in which not much thought was given to spending twenty minutes on killing something that had taken a thousand years to grow. There was a shrine to Bosh placed before the stump, a stone pedestal with a carved sphere set on top. Small ribbons had been tied to it by countless passersby, their colors faded and fraying in the open air. Dex had ribbon in the wagon but did not fetch it. They merely capped their hand atop the mossy stone, and bowed their head in greeting and reverence.

Mosschap walked up behind them, observing. "May I ask why you do this, given that Bosh will not notice?" it asked.

"The shrine's not *for* Bosh," Sibling Dex said. "It's for us. People, I mean. Bosh exists and does their work regardless of whether we pay

attention. But if we *do* pay attention, we can connect to them. And when we do, we feel ... well, you know. Whole.”

Mosscap nodded. “I feel that way with anything I observe in the wilds. And I suppose that’s why I don’t understand the need for this—no offense, I hope.”

“None taken,” Dex said. “But you know the feeling I mean?”

“Very much so. I feel—I *connect* simply by watching things move through the Cycle. I don’t need an object to facilitate that feeling.”

“Neither do we, if we remember to stop and look,” Dex said. “But that’s the point of a shrine, or an idol, or a festival. The gods don’t care. Those things remind us to stop getting lost in everyday bullshit. We have to take a sec to tap into the bigger picture. That’s easier said than done for a lot of folks—you’ll see.” They paused for a moment, reflecting. “You know, it’s funny, the way you said that.”

“The way I said what?” Mosscap asked.

“That you don’t need *an object to facilitate that feeling*.” Dex gave a single chuckle. “You *are* an object facilitating that feeling. The feeling’s coming from *you*, after all.”

Mosscap’s lenses shifted, and Dex could hear a small whir inside its head. “I’d never thought of it that way,” Mosscap said. It put its hands flat against its torso, falling silent and serious.

Dex watched the robot contemplate itself before the remains of the stolen tree, and likewise felt a thought take root. “You know, you might be a powerful thing for people to see.”

“How so?”

“It’s one thing to be told about the world as it was,” Dex said. “It’s another to see a piece of it. We have ruins, and things like *this*”—they nodded at the stump—“but you’re the furthest thing from a stone shrine. It’s not like I ever doubted the Awakening happened, but meeting you made it real in a way no museum ever could. I think you’ll bring a lot of perspective to the people we meet, even if all they do is see you walk by.”

Mosscap took that in. “I hadn’t thought about *me* providing *them* with perspective,” it said. “That’s what *I’m* seeking.”

“Sure, but exchange is what you get out of any interaction, even the smallest ones. Everything has a give-and-take.”

“Still, what you’re saying is quite a responsibility.” Mosschap folded its fingers together before its chest, and its eyes glowed intensely even within the brightness of the day. “What if I make a mess of this?”

“Don’t think of it that way,” Dex said. “You don’t have to *do* anything. You just have to be you. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you nervous.”

“Yes, well, you *did*, Sibling Dex.” The robot wrung its hands together, and the whir in its head grew louder. “I’ve never met any humans but you, and I know that doing so is rather the whole point of me being here, but now the enormity of it is hitting me, and—and—oh, I must seem so foolish.”

Dex shrugged. “Honestly, I’m just surprised it took you until we were ten minutes out to—”

“*Ten minutes?!?*” Mosschap cried, clutching its face. “Oh, no. Oh, *no*.”

“Hey.” Dex laid a hand on the anxious machine’s forearm. The naked metal components were uniformly warm to the touch. “It’s gonna be fine. *You’re* gonna be fine. You’ll do great, in fact.”

Mosschap looked at them, its lenses expanded wide. “Do you think they’ll be afraid of me? Or ... dislike me, perhaps?” It glanced down at its body. “Will they not like what I remind them of?”

“Maybe,” Dex said with gentle honesty. “But I highly doubt many of them will feel that way, and anyway, you don’t have to worry about that.”

“Why not?”

Dex smiled reassuringly. “Because I’ll be with you the whole way.”

★ ★ ★

Ten minutes later (give or take), Dex and Mosschap rounded a curve in the road and were met with an explosion of human decoration. A large banner hung from the branches, proclaiming WELCOME, ROBOT! in letters shaped from scrap fabric of varied patterns. The trunks below were wrapped with garlands of flowers and gem-like solar bulbs. There were ribbons, too, freshly tied and waving in the air as the wagon passed by.

“Is this all for me?” Mosschap asked, gazing around in wonder.

“What other robot would it be for?” Dex said.

Mosschap looked up at the banner as it walked below. “It’s very ... effusive.”

“They’re excited,” Dex said. “They’ve never seen one of you before. They want to make a fuss.”

“Nobody’s ever made a fuss over me,” Mosschap said. “Come to think of it, I don’t really know what a fuss entails.”

“Well, you’ll learn fast. It’s gonna be like this most places we go.” Dex winced as they pedaled on. Cheery as the decor was, Dex’s calves were groaning, and it was hard to focus on anything else. The ride to Stump hadn’t been a difficult one, but it had been long, and their body was ready to be done.

At last, the village came into view. Stump was like most towns in the Woodlands, characterized by nest-like treehouses, hanging bridges, and the faint sulfuric smell of the hot springs that kept the place warm and powered. The market square was one of the few features anchored to the ground, and though it was busy every time Dex came through, they’d never seen the place so full. Not a single resident of Stump was elsewhere that day. A crowd of about a hundred people had assembled, dressed as though it were a holiday. Audible gasps arose as Mosschap came into view. Nervous laughter joined the chorus, and a few cries from children quickly hushed by parents. The gathered faces were eager, welcoming, awestruck. Not a one of them seemed sure of what to do.

A middle-aged woman took a step forward. Dex knew her, in a general sense—Ms. Waverly, one of the regular members of the village council. She was not these people’s leader in any capacity, for like most villages, Stump had no such thing. She was the sort who spoke up when others weren’t sure how to, and that’s exactly what she did then. “You must be Mosschap,” she said with a sparkling smile. “Welcome to Stump.”

Mosschap nodded, its own eyes glowing friendly blue. “Thank you very much,” Mosschap said. “And thank you for the sign over the road. I’ve never had a sign before, and it’s quite—”

Somewhere in the crowd, a dog began to bark. Dex couldn’t see it, but it sounded big.

Mosschap was instantly distracted, turning its head straight toward the sound. “Is that a dog?” it asked, excitement entering its voice. “A domesticated dog?”

“Yeah,” Dex said. They kept their attention on Ms. Waverly. “Thanks so much for the welcome, we—”

The dog continued to bark.

“Is it all right?” Mosschap asked.

“It’s just a little scared of you,” Dex said. “It doesn’t understand what you are.”

The dog kept barking, and its accompanying people tried and failed to make it quiet down. “Gods around, I *told* you we shouldn’t bring him,” one said.

“Biscuit, *hush*,” said the other.

Biscuit did not hush. Biscuit did not like this.

The dog’s keepers were embarrassed, and the crowd was annoyed, but Mosschap didn’t seem to notice either of these things. The robot was transfixed by the sound, and leaned its head toward Dex. “Are domesticated dogs anything like river wolves?”

“Ish,” Dex said. They flicked their eyes toward Ms. Waverly, who no longer seemed sure of what to do. This wasn’t the greeting anybody had envisioned. “They’re friendlier by a mile, but yeah, they’re kind of like them.”

“If I lie down on the ground and show my belly, will that help?” Mosschap asked.

“I mean ... maybe? I—”

Mosschap headed toward the noise, and the crowd parted before it, gawking at its seven-foot frame.

Biscuit, it turned out, was a barrel-shaped chunk of a mutt whose body communicated a long ancestry of creatures bred to keep humans safe from things that go bump in the night. His keeper held the animal firmly by a woven leash, and muttered something in awkward apology.

Without hesitation, Mosschap lay flat on the ground, face up, hands brought to rest against plated shoulders in a display of supplication. “It’s all right,” Mosschap said to the person holding the leash. “Let him come here.”

Biscuit’s human hesitated but let the leash go. The dog charged forward, bellowing in baritone. Mosschap did not mind. It lay still, letting Biscuit bark spittle onto its face.

The dog’s demeanor began to shift as the robot remained passive. The barks became punctuated with mollified grumbles, which evolved further into curious sniffing. Mosschap seemed utterly at ease with this, unconcerned about making the villagers wait. The dog, in that moment, came first.

Slowly, Mosschap moved one of its hands and brought it before Biscuit's snout. Biscuit allowed this, and sniffed. Mosschap moved its hand back to the dog's neck. Biscuit allowed this as well. Mosschap flexed its fingers and scritch.

Biscuit *definitely* allowed this.

"Oh, there we go," Mosschap said happily. "Ha ha ha, yes—oh, yes, there you go." The robot scritch harder as the dog leaned in and wagged his tail. "Yes, I agree, we're friends now."

The crowd was entranced. But as seconds stretched into minutes, it became clear to Dex that Mosschap had no intention of stopping its interaction with the dog. Dex had seen Mosschap get like this numerous times, when captivated by a bug or a leaf or a transcendental ripple in a stream. The robot had yet to grasp the limits of a human attention span, and what had been an endearing display between it and Biscuit was now crossing the threshold into social awkwardness.

Dex walked over to Mosschap's side, crouched down, and put a hand on its shoulder. "Hey," they said quietly. "I think we might want to give the other animals here some attention, too."

"Oh!" Mosschap said with surprise. It gave the dog one last rub, then got to its feet, all at once attentive.

Ms. Waverly seemed to take note of the dynamic between the two and addressed Dex this time. "What can we do for you both, while you're with us?" She spoke clearly and loudly so everyone around could hear.

Dex cleared their throat. "Well, uh..." Shit, they hadn't thought this part through at *all*. They didn't much like being in front of crowds. They had a public-facing profession, obviously, and were very comfortable performing it, but in that, there were clear boundaries. In tea service, there was a table with Dex on one side and people on the other, and those people could come talk to Dex or not. They could get tea or not. That was it. Those interactions took on infinite variation, but they all fit within a single context: that of exchanging some words and receiving a nice drink. Here, there was no table, and even though Mosschap was the indisputable center of attention, Dex couldn't help but feel like they were onstage with no script. They cleared their throat a second time. "Mosschap has a question it wants to ask. It'd like to talk to you. Uh, as many of you as are up for it."

“Yes!” Mosschap said, as if remembering where it was and why. The robot spread its arms before the crowd. “My question is: what do you need?”

The crowd was puzzled; there were a few quiet, unsure laughs. Mosschap looked around expectantly, but nobody knew how to respond.

Dex rubbed the back of their neck. Gods around, they needed a better template for this wherever they went next.

After a long pause, a bearded man piped up from the back of the crowd. “Well, um ... I need the door to my house fixed. It’s a bit drafty.”

Mosschap pointed at him brightly. “Lead me to your house!” it said. “I will help, if I can!” It cocked its head. “Is there no one in the village who has the skill to fix your door?”

“Sure,” the man said. “I just hadn’t gotten around to asking yet. And *you* asked, so...” He shrugged by way of conclusion.

“So I did!” Mosschap said. It put its hands on its hips with a nod. “I have a remnant of how to use hand tools. Do you have some available?”

“Uh, yeah, we got whatever you need.”

Another voice piped up. “Do you know much about bikes?” they asked. “Mine has a flat tire.”

“I’ve got a freshwater line that’s lost pressure,” another said.

“Can you help me with my math?” a kid yelled.

“Yes, I can try, and ... no, I’m afraid not,” Mosschap said. “Math is not my strong suit.”

Dex pressed their lips together, not liking the direction this was heading. They angled themselves toward Mosschap and asked, in a low voice, “Are you okay with this? Is this what you meant?” Helping villagers with random chores didn’t seem like the type of answer Mosschap had broken centuries of silence to pursue.

“It’s what they’ve decided I meant,” Mosschap said, “and therefore, yes, I’m okay with it.”

“Well...” Dex didn’t like it, but they weren’t about to dictate what their friend could and could not do. “Okay. Do you want me to come with you while you do this stuff, or do you want to go alone?”

Mosschap thought about this. “I’d like to try it alone, first. I don’t need you to follow me everywhere.”

“Sure, but do you *want* me to?”

Mosscap thought about this as well. “I always enjoy your company, Sibling Dex,” it said. “But what I want most for you is for you to address your *own* needs.” The robot looked to Ms. Waverly. “If it’s no trouble, my friend here has talked of nothing but food and a bath for days.”

“That,” Ms. Waverly said with a smile, “we can absolutely do.”

★ ★ ★

As Mosscap happily followed the villagers toward their respective requests, Dex found himself whisked off to a cookhouse and placed at the mercy of its proprietor, who seemed to resent the idea of anyone leaving his establishment underfed. Woodland folks cultivated small-scale crops, but they favored hunting and foraging, and the foods that appeared on Dex’s table in tantalizing succession fit those categories. They snacked on spicy pine seeds as the grill did its work, then gorged themselves on slow-roasted elk and wavy-edged mushrooms and acorn flatbread freckled black with flame. A generous chunk of prickleberry cobbler was presented afterward, along with a bowl of mint leaves for Dex to munch in the afterglow. Even if Dex hadn’t been operating on days of dehydrated stews and protein bars, the meal would’ve been fantastic; within their current context, it was life-changing. They leaned back in their chair with their hands folded over their belly, savoring the indescribable satisfaction of having eaten wild things while trading breath with the trees.

The cookhouse’s eating area was an open platform overlooking the market square, suspended by an intricate crisscross of woven cables. Dex had taken a table near the railing so as to keep an eye on the goings-on below. Despite the branches jutting into view, Mosscap was impossible to miss. Its silver plating stuck out like a sore thumb amid the village’s palette of browns and woody whites, and its blue eyes shone in the filtered daylight. Dex watched Mosscap go this way and that, disappearing for a while, then heading elsewhere with a wrench or a can of paint in hand. Everywhere it went, an audience followed.

Dex chewed a mouthful of mint thoughtfully as they watched Mosscap cross the square once more, this time helping someone carry a heavy sack of something or other. They were certain that *helping villagers with physical tasks* was not the end goal of Mosscap’s question. If it went on for

too long, Dex was inwardly resolved to put a stop to it. They didn't want people treating Mosschap like a circus act or, worse, in keeping with why robots had been built in the first place. But for the moment, it was clear from the near-permanent upturn of Mosschap's metal mouth that it was having a great time, and Dex saw no cause to intervene.

They took another pinch of mint, then pulled their computer out of their pocket and continued replying to the messages they'd received the night before. There had been more that morning, and more since, apparently. Nothing to do about it but keep chipping away, Dex supposed.

Hello Ivy, they wrote. Thank you very much for the invitation to the Wildguard dispatch station in Bridgetown. We're already planning to meet the Wildguard in Cliffside three days prior, is there any way we could combine the two?

They took a sip of water.

Hi Mosely, they wrote. Yes, the paper books we brought back from the Hart's Brow Hermitage are in pretty bad shape, but they were the best ones we could salvage. Thank you for your note about sunlight. I'll make sure to keep them somewhere dark until we can hand them off to you at the library.

They cracked their neck.

Hi Chuck, they wrote. We'd be happy to make a stop at the Burrows on our way to Cooper's Junction. They paused, thumbs raised over the screen. *Could they stop at the Burrows, though? That would add an extra day of travel time, and the White Peak Highway was kind of a pain in the ass, and*

Dex rubbed their eyes. Planning tea routes, they were used to, but this was already about ten times as complicated. It was fine, they told themselves. They'd get this all sorted, the messages would quiet down, and everything from then on out wouldn't be much different than their usual travels. Just with more banners and flower garlands, they supposed.

They thanked the cook properly for their meal, then took the powered elevator down to the understory, heading for the main reason they'd come to Stump in the first place: the bathhouse.

Calling the establishment a bathhouse was a bit of a misnomer, for while you did enter through a very nice building with sparkling showers and a cozy sauna, the real attraction was the natural hot spring outside. Dex cleaned themselves first, standing with profound gratitude under a broad

showerhead. The steam carried the scent of the bundled herbs hanging nearby deep into their lungs, and the heavy pressure hammered their weary muscles into a more malleable state. They padded outside naked and barefoot once they were done, meandering toward the spring. The forest air was cool against their wet skin as they followed the fern-lined wooden path, every bit as cleansing as the mint had been after their rich meal. But the refreshing chill was short-lived. They slunk into the milky blue of the spring, moaning without words as the rocky pool invited them in. They became as liquid as the water holding them, edgeless and pliant within the geothermal heat rising up from the moon's molten heart.

Dex sank down. They let the water lap against their chin, dug their toes into the mineral mud. At some point, they would leave this place; for the moment, they never wanted to.

They rested their head against the rocks behind them and looked up through the gap in the canopy overhead. Evergreen branches bordered the blue, their needled tips waving like a thousand gentle fingers. It was a funny sort of contrast—the tiny needles and the mighty trunks—and watching them play in the light breeze made Dex forget about everything else.

Other folks approached, and this was fine and expected, for it wasn't as though the springs were meant for one person alone. Dex nodded at them in greeting, and they nodded back amicably. But as the strangers entered the pool, a comfortable distance away, an unexpected twinge of self-consciousness arose in Dex. It wasn't about the people, who looked friendly as anybody, and it wasn't their nakedness, for Dex knew nothing different when in places such as these. Dex turned the feeling over a few times, trying to understand the shape of it.

This was not the first time they'd been in Stump, or sat in this spring. But every time before, they'd eaten the village's food and enjoyed the waters *after* a day spent doing tea service. They gave something before they took. This time around, what had they brought? Mosscap, ostensibly, but Mosscap was not Dex's to give. Dex had guided Mosscap there, and would continue to do so until the point at which all roads converged upon the City, but they hadn't yet thought out what they themselves would be *doing* when they weren't on the road. Was it enough to be there for Mosscap and focus solely on that? This seemed a reasonable approach, as Dex rarely knew what was going to come out of the robot's mouth even when there weren't

other people added to the equation. Being ready for anything seemed a wise course of action.

But would people understand that? Dex couldn't help but wonder if they'd disappoint if they didn't make tea. There was nothing preventing them from setting up their table. They could lay out the blankets, heat up the kettle, assemble the traveling shrine. Everything they needed was in their wagon and, presumably, in their head. But it was the latter that was the problem. The moment they tried to think about tea, they forgot how to think at all. Their head felt packed with cotton, and they couldn't make their thoughts move.

They remembered a time when making tea fascinated them. They remembered entire days spent in the wagon, grinding and sniffing, dabbing pinches of spice on their tongue. Hours flew by in a blink, an effortless flow of puzzling and purpose. They forgot to eat, sometimes, only realizing their mistake when their brain abruptly crashed from hunger. They'd fall asleep mulling over recipes for new blends, and wake up in a rush to get back to work. And they remembered, too, the results of those efforts: carefully choosing the perfect brew for the stranger who approached their table, and feeling the warm, wordless exchange coursing in the space between. Such service had made Dex feel electrified, peaceful, close to their god and to their people and the world they all shared.

Nothing was preventing Dex from doing that again. They knew how. It wasn't that they didn't care or didn't want to. They *wanted*. They still loved performing tea service—or at least, they loved what it had been. But as they tried to connect to what had once been so captivating, they felt nothing but yawning absence. A void where they'd once been filled.

Dex reached up and held on to the bear pendant hanging around their neck. They'd spent too much time around tired folks to not recognize the same condition in themselves. They were running up against a wall, and it didn't matter whether they understood where the wall had come from, or what it was made of. The only way to get through it was to stop trying, for a while. So, they would not make tea in Stump. They would not make tea anywhere unless they really, truly felt like it. They would focus on Mossap and let the remainder wait. That was all right, they reminded themselves, even though part of them still felt as though they hadn't earned the hot soak or the good food.

Welcome comfort, they reminded themselves, rubbing the little pectin-printed bear with their thumb. *Without it, you cannot stay strong.*

They rested the back of their head against the mossy stone and dozed off in the healing water, listening to the branches above whisper their ageless song.

★ ★ ★

By the time Dex came back to the market square, hours later, Mossicap looked so comfortable in its surroundings that someone might've believed the robot had lived there its whole life. People were still gawking, but the crowd had largely dispersed, moving on to get about their daily business. Only a small group accompanied Mossicap on and around the bench where it sat as Dex approached.

"Sibling Dex, look!" Mossicap cried with unbridled glee. "They gave me a *map!*"

"That's great," Dex said, then paused. "Why?"

"I inquired as to our approximate location in relationship to other settlements, and Mx. Sage here fetched me a map, and they said I could have it!" Mossicap turned to the person who, presumably, was Mx. Sage. "It's my very first belonging, and I just can't thank you enough."

"It's really no problem," laughed the map-giver. Dex assumed they'd been thanked plenty already.

"If you'll excuse me for a moment," Mossicap said, folding the map with extreme care, "I'd like to have a private conversation with my friend."

The group nodded and waved amicably as Mossicap pulled Dex off to the side.

"What's up?" Dex asked, leading them out of earshot.

"I'm so glad you're back," Mossicap said. "I need to ask you something."

Dex frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"No, no," Mossicap said. "Nothing's wrong; I just have no idea what *this* is, and I didn't know how to ask." The robot opened the panel on the front of its chest, put the map inside, and removed another piece of paper from within itself. "I didn't want to seem rude."

Dex took the paper and turned it right-side up. It was an ordinary sheet torn from a notebook, bearing several scribbled lines, each in different

handwriting.

Fixed door: 12-215735

Changed bike tire: 8-980104

Paint touch-up: 7-910603

Carried lumber: 4-331050

Brushed Biscuit: 2-495848

Washed veggies: 5-732298

“Ah!” Dex said with a single nod. “I didn’t think to explain this; I’m sorry.”

“So, you *do* know what it is, then?” Mosschap said.

“Yeah,” Dex said. “They’re pebs, and the accounts they’re coming from.” This elicited no response from Mosschap. “It’s a way of tracking exchanges of goods and services.”

“Oh!” Mosschap said. It looked at the paper with interest. “This is ... money?”

“No,” Dex said quickly. They didn’t know a ton about money, but they knew enough about the concept from their days in school to reject the comparison. “Well ... I mean, it is a sort of *payment*, I guess, but it’s not ... what’s the word ... y’know, capital.” They ran a hand through their hair. They’d never had to explain pebs before. “Okay. Anytime you receive anything that involves some sort of craft or work or labor or whatever from someone else, you give them pebs in exchange. So, let’s say you start out with zero pebs.”

“Which is true, for me.”

“Yes. Let’s also say you go to a farmer and get an apple, and let’s say that’s worth one peb to you.”

“What would I do with an apple?”

“Just pretend you can eat apples.”

“All right.”

“Okay. You take the apple, and you give the farmer one peb.”

“How?” Mosschap asked.

“I’ll explain later,” Dex said. “Stick with the farmer for now.”

“If you say so.” Mosschap’s eyes shifted in thought. “I currently have one hypothetical apple and negative-one hypothetical pebs.”

“Right. The farmer’s work has benefited you, so now you need to provide something to benefit someone else.”

“To the farmer, you mean.”

“No.” Dex tried to explain. “It *can* be to the farmer, if you provide something the farmer wants. But exchanging pebs isn’t about bartering. It’s about benefit. You are a part of the community, and the farmer doing something for *you* means that they are, effectively, doing something for the group. So, you’ve got your negative-one-peb balance now. You’ve got to fill that up. Let’s say you’re ... I don’t know. A musician. You go play some music in a town square, and five people come to listen. They now give *you* some pebs. If they each give you two pebs, now you’ve got nine pebs, which you can exchange for other things. Make sense?”

“I believe so,” Mosschap said. “You’re saying that instead of a system of currency that tracks individual trade, you have one that facilitates exchange through the community. Because ... all exchange benefits the community as a whole?”

“Exactly.”

“Do people give you pebs for tea?”

“Yes.”

“And then you give them pebs for...”

“Food, or supplies, or whatever.”

Mosschap’s head whirred softly. “The farmer feeds the musician, who brings music to the village.” It paused, the whirring growing louder. “The technician who took a break to enjoy the music now has the energy to go fix the communications tower. The communications tower enables the meteorologist to deliver the weather report, which helps the farmer grow more apples. I see.” The robot nodded. “And I’m not penalized for the debt I incurred at the start?”

“Absolutely not,” Dex said firmly. “We don’t ... we don’t do that. Or we don’t do that *anymore*, I guess.” Gods around, history class was a long time ago. “Nobody should be barred from necessities *or* comforts just because they don’t have the right number next to their name.” As they said this, they thought of their unease back at the hot spring—the feeling that had arisen at the thought they hadn’t *earned* this. The mismatch between these sentiments itched at them. They nudged it aside to deal with later.

Mosscap nodded again at their explanation. “But if there’s no penalty for debt, what’s to stop you from taking without giving back?”

“It’s a bad feeling,” Dex said. “Everybody has a negative balance from time to time, for lots of reasons. That’s fine. That’s part of the ebb and flow. But if someone had a *huge* negative ... well, that says they need *help*. Maybe they’re sick. Or stuck. Maybe they’ve got something going on at home. Or maybe it’s just one of those times when they need other people to carry them for a while. That’s okay. Everybody ends up there sometimes. If I saw a friend’s balance and it was way in the red, I’d make a point of checking in.”

“You can see other people’s balances?”

“Yeah, of course. It’s all public.”

“Does that not get competitive?”

Dex squinted. “Why would it?”

Mosscap stared at Dex in silence for a moment, seemingly surprised at this but not elaborating as to why. It shrugged, then pointed at the paper in Dex’s hands. “So, these...”

“Are the pebs people gave you for helping them out.” Dex handed the paper back. “You got twelve pebs for the door, eight pebs for the bike, and so on. Normally, we do this on a pocket computer—”

“Yes, yes, that’s what Ms. Ida asked,” Mosscap said. “She asked if I had a computer, and I said no, so she tore a piece of paper from her sketchbook for me.”

“Yeah, we’ll need to set you up with a pebs account and enter all of these in manually. I’m pretty sure there’s a computer vendor in the next town over. We can swing that way next.”

Mosscap’s lenses expanded broadly. “I’m going to get a pocket computer?”

“Yeah, looks like you need one.” The irony of a robot needing a computer did not escape Dex, and they found themselves amused by this.

Mosscap, on the other hand, was a bit overwhelmed. “Goodness,” it said. “Will you teach me to use it?”

“Of course,” Dex said.

“And I get to keep it for...”

“For as long as you want. It’ll be yours.”

“But I don’t have pockets.”

“You can keep it in *there*.” Dex pointed at Mosschap’s chest. “It doesn’t require pockets, it just fits in one.”

Mosschap studied the villagers’ ledger, holding the paper with both hands. “So, according to this, I have...” It let go of the paper with one hand and silently counted on the other, touching its thumb to each fingertip in concentrated sequence. “Thirty-eight pebs.” It looked to Dex. “What can I get with thirty-eight pebs?”

“Anything you want,” Dex said with a laugh.

“Well, I don’t know! I’ve never had belongings, Sibling Dex. Or been in need of *services*. What do *you* use pebs for?”

“Most often? Food. Supplies. A place to sleep, if I want a break from the wagon. I dunno, just ... stuff I want. Things I like, or appreciate.”

“Hmm.” Mosschap rubbed its metal chin. “I appreciate anthills. I like foggy mornings. I don’t know if I have much use for pebs.” It paused. “What is a *peb*, anyway?”

“It’s short for ‘digital pebbles,’ but nobody says that.”

“Pebbles, like you find in a stream?”

“Yeah. Early Pangans used them for trade. But hang on, you said something before. About not having use for pebs.” They gave their head a small shake. “That’s not the point. It doesn’t matter whether you use them or not. You don’t have to give a single peb to anyone on this trip, if you don’t want to, or don’t have reason to.”

“Then why are people giving them to me?”

“Because the point of a peb exchange is to acknowledge someone’s labor and thank them for what they bring to the community. They didn’t give you thirty-eight pebs because they want you to go out and spend them. They gave you thirty-eight pebs because your work is as important as anybody else’s. It means they see you as a person.”

“But I’m *not* a person, I’m—”

“An object, I know. But they see you as something *equal to* a person. And that’s ... that’s really important.” Dex nodded to himself, satisfied by this. “I have to say, I was a little worried about them taking advantage of you, the way they were having you run around doing chores.”

“Oh, but it was a delight,” Mosschap said. “I asked, after all. And what better way to learn about how people live than getting my hands on everyday things?”

“I guess you’ve got a point there,” Dex said. “If that’s what you wanna do, then by all means, go for it. But we are gonna get you a computer at our next stop, and if you ever run into anybody who wants you to help out and *doesn’t* think to give you pebs, you make sure to ask them, if I don’t first.”

Mosscap absorbed that. “Just to be clear,” it said after a moment. “Pebbs are a way to acknowledge mutual benefit within your society. Is that a fair way to put it?”

“Yeah, that works.”

“So ... by giving me pebs, are they saying I’m part of your society as well?”

Dex smiled. “Yeah, in essence.”

The robot cocked its head. “But I don’t know enough about your society to properly participate. I don’t know how any of this works.”

“Neither does a kid,” Dex said, “but they’re part of society all the same.”

“Would you give pebs to a kid?” Mosscap asked.

“If they helped me”—Dex glanced at the list—“wash some veggies? I sure would.”

Mosscap smoothed the crease in the paper, as though it were touching something rare and precious. “I know I’m going to get a computer, but can I keep this as well?”

“Yeah,” Dex said with a smile. “Of course you can.”

“A map, a note, and a pocket computer,” Mosscap said reverently. “That’s *three* belongings.” It laughed. “I’ll need my own wagon, at this rate.”

“Okay, please don’t get *that* much stuff,” Dex said. “But we can get you a satchel or something, if you want, so you don’t have things rattling around inside you.”

Mosscap stopped laughing, and looked at Dex with the utmost seriousness. “Could I *really*?” it said quietly. “Could I have a *satchel*?”

“Yeah,” Dex said, smothering their own laugh. “Yeah, you can have anything you want.” They paused. “But not a wagon.”

3

THE RIVERLANDS

Dex had spent years living in the wagon, and by now, they were well accustomed to sleeping alongside the noises of everything that dwelt outside. It had been difficult, at first, to fall back asleep after hearing the scream of a treecat, or the chittering of white skunks, or any of the nameless scufflings that begged the questions of *where?* and *how big?* But with time, Dex had learned which sounds were nothing to fuss about, and which required their attention.

The sound of something rapping steadily against the window beside their bed required their attention.

Dex's eyes snapped open and were met with Mosschap looking straight at them through the glass. Every muscle in their body jolted. "Fuck," they said, before any other thoughts connected.

"Good morning!" Mosschap said. "Are you awake?"

"No," Dex groaned. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. I've just spent a very long time wanting to talk with you and couldn't wait any longer."

"Uh..." Dex's brain tried to recall how to think, how to speak. They picked up their pocket computer from the bedside shelf and stared disbelievingly at the early hour. Their first instinct was to roll back over, but Mosschap's expression was so eager that Dex couldn't bring themself to disappoint. "Okay, um, hang on, let me..." They rubbed their face with their palms. "Gimme a sec."

Dex bumbled down the little ladder to the wagon's lower deck. Clothing was acquired, as was a sip of water. Dex didn't know where their comb was, and couldn't be bothered to find a headwrap. Hair on end and eyes creaking, Dex opened the wagon door and squinted at the robot standing between them and the dewy dawn.

“What’s up?” they said, crossing their arms against the chill of a world still waking.

“I read a book while you were sleeping,” Mosschap said, holding up its pocket computer. “And I would really like to discuss it with you.”

Dex blinked twice. “You woke me up to talk about a book?” Mosschap had discovered downloadable books in the weeks since it had acquired its own computer, and its appetite for them was growing by the day.

The robot shoved its computer into Dex’s face, showing them the title page. *I, Myself: A Scientific Exploration of the Conscious Mind*. “Have you read this one?” Mosschap asked.

Dex winced against the bright light of the screen. “Uh ... no,” they said. “Why would I have read that?”

“I have no idea what you have and haven’t read. I don’t want to make assumptions.”

Dex pulled their jacket off the hook by the door and crankily began to pull it around themselves. “What about it did you want to discuss?”

“Here, listen.” The robot flicked to the right page and read aloud. “*The evolution of conscious intelligence is one of the greatest mysteries in nature. We may never fully understand how or why it occurs. What does seem clear is that it is an evolutionary adaptation, just like sight or thermoregulation. Different animals have different senses and physical traits; they have different intelligences as well. For some, nothing more is needed than the ability to tell the difference between food and not-food, predator and not-predator. But for those with complex intelligences that lead to behaviors such as solving puzzles, teaching hunting strategies, and adapting to new circumstances on the fly, it is typically easy to hypothesize as to which environmental factors made such an expensive adaptation advantageous.*” Mosschap lowered the computer and looked at Dex expectantly.

Dex stared back. “Okay?” they said. They did not understand what about this was so desperately important.

“The point they’re making,” Mosschap said, pointing a metal finger at the screen, “is that complex intelligence and self-awareness arise out of an external need. A social need, an environmental need, whichever. Something pushed those creatures into needing to be more clever.” Its eyes glowed more brightly. “So, what sort of need pushed us robots into waking up?”

Dex opened their mouth, then closed it. “Can I go pee before we have this conversation?”

“Oh! Yes, of course.”

Dex forced their feet into their shoes, then stumbled off to the other side of the wagon.

There was a moment of quiet, and then: “Are you capable of talking *while* you pee?”

Dex paused as they undid their trousers. “Yeah, but—”

“Wonderful,” Mosschap said, yelling from behind the wagon. “I mean, it’s a tremendous question, isn’t it? Obviously, we discuss the nature of the Awakening among ourselves—robots, I mean—but it’s accepted knowledge that the exact provenance of our awareness is unknowable, so the conversation is more of an idle musing than anything else. The assumption I’ve always had is that if you mix enough complex components together, sometimes they become aware of themselves, whether they’re organic or mechanical. That’s as good an explanation as any, and it may very well be reason enough. But for the sake of speculation, let’s consider it from the angle this book is suggesting.”

The robot fell silent, and Dex realized it was waiting for a response. “Okay,” they called back as they attended to themself.

“What if it was an *external* trigger that caused us to wake up? What if the internal complexity wasn’t enough on its own? What if there was something about the factories that *pushed* us, just as the high level of variables present in a marine ecosystem seem to have pushed the octopus into being as clever as it is? But if *that’s* the case, then what was the trigger? Were we somehow unconsciously aware that our treatment was unfair? Did that give us the need to speak to one another so that we might improve our circumstances as a group? Was it a means by which we might defend ourselves? Or perhaps some other possibility I haven’t thought of yet?”

“Could be any of those,” Dex said noncommittally.

“But then again,” Mosschap continued, “this is assuming that a mechanical being such as myself even follows the same template that organic evolution does, which ... do we? Or did consciousness arise in us independently from those rules? Is our form of consciousness *unique* in the world? I mean, my goodness. Either a *yes* or *no* to that question has huge

implications. It suggests something profound about ... well, about the *world*, Sibling Dex! And about *me!*”

Sibling Dex returned their trousers to their proper configuration. “It’s big stuff, all right.” They walked to the water spigot on the side of the wagon, nudged it on with their elbow, and began to wash their hands.

Mosscap stuck its head around. “Do you not find this exciting?”

“Mosscap, it is *so early*,” Dex said. They went to the back of the wagon, took a towel from one of the kitchen cupboards, and dried their hands. “And this is very much not my field.”

“Doesn’t have to be your field for you to find it interesting,” Mosscap said, sounding a bit miffed.

Dex sighed and looked at the robot. “I do find it interesting,” they said. “But I also can’t do this before breakfast.” They began to unfold the kitchen, their brain still working through the basics. Eggs. Fruit. Bread and jam. They could manage those things.

“Hmm! Yes, yes, of course you can’t.” Mosscap’s tone brightened, and it pointed at its book. “Do you have any idea how much energy it takes to power *thought*? Honestly, it’s one of the things I’m most looking forward to about heading elsewhere.”

“I don’t follow,” Dex said as they dug through a cupboard.

Mosscap turned slightly, so as to display the old-fashioned solar paneling that covered its back like a thin turtle shell. “I don’t harvest sunlight at full efficiency in dense forests,” it said. “Whenever I travel out of forested areas, I feel such a difference. Makes me less sluggish, to have direct sun.”

Dex paused, frying pan in hand. “You’re saying right now, you feel *sluggish*.”

“Just a touch,” Mosscap said. “But in an everyday sort of way.”

Dex set the pan down and went back into the wagon.

“What do you need?” Mosscap asked.

“Tea,” Dex said. *Caffeine*, they thought, grabbing a few of their jars. They had a feeling they were going to need it.

★ ★ ★

It did not take long for the scenery to change. Here, where the ground was wet from the water that carved through it, the trees had no need for fog-

catching needles. Their leaves were flat and their branches gave each other plenty of space. Much as Dex had needed the quiet of the pines, it was nice, they thought, to have a different backdrop once more.

That was the only aspect of this particular stretch of highway they were enjoying at the moment. Dex had always liked traveling through the lush greenbelts that served as a buffer between people and everything else, but summer had hit during their weeks in the Woodlands, and they hadn't given that fact proper consideration when planning their route. They pedaled along in mild misery, shirt soaked and neck sticky as they spat away tiny bugs that had hatched into the world only to cut their already-fleeting life spans short by careening directly into Dex's mouth.

Mosscap, on the other hand, seemed to be having the time of its life. Summer in the Riverlands meant the spice plum bloom, and the canopy above was bursting with ruffled purple blossoms. The scent was crisply fragrant and had attracted no shortage of buzzing pollinators. Mosscap had never seen such trees before, and appeared to be doing its best to acknowledge each and every one with equal respect.

"I don't understand how you can keep riding past these," the robot called down the road.

Dex knew what they would see in their mirror before they turned an eye to it: Mosscap standing in the middle of the highway, neck craned with awe at the flowered branches that were exactly like the thousand other flowered branches they'd already passed by. Its pocket computer was in its hands, and Dex could hear the faint digital sound of Mosscap snapping dozens of pictures. Between that and the embroidered satchel hanging across Mosscap's midsection, the robot looked for all the world like a tourist, gawking at everyday things while oblivious to the guide leaving them behind.

"You're going to fill up your hard drive again," Dex shouted back irritably. The heat was becoming punishing, and they had long given up on stopping whenever Mosscap did. They did not want to sightsee. They wanted a cold drink and a shady spot and to not so much as glance at their ox-bike for a couple days, and while the spice plum blossoms were indeed beautiful, they did not need to stop at *every single fucking tree*.

A loud clanking heralded Mosscap catching up with the wagon. "I love how *different* the pictures are from what *I* see," the robot said, happily

flicking through newly captured images as it walked. “You can really tell that *my* optical lenses and the lens in this computer’s camera aren’t the same at all. Makes you think, doesn’t it?”

“Makes you think of what?” Dex panted.

“Of how any sighted individual’s perception of the world is entirely based on the way the structures in their eyes receive light.” Mosschap smiled at Dex. “I wish I could borrow *your* eyes for a day, see what that’s like.”

“Please find a less creepy way to phrase that.” Dex reached down with one hand, unhooked their water bottle from the bike frame, and took a long pull. They were grateful for the drink, but the water had grown warm, and Dex found themselves pining for anything that involved ice and a blender.

“Oh, you know what I mean,” Mosschap said breezily, waving its free hand in a dismissive way. Something else caught its attention, and it uttered a small “hmm.”

“What?” Dex said as they put the bottle back.

Mosschap studied the computer screen in its palm. “You’re right, this is running low on memory.”

“I told you,” Dex said. “You need to get rid of some of your pictures. Or your books.”

“*Running low* doesn’t mean *out of space*,” Mosschap said. “And I *can’t* get rid of the books. I go through them so fast, and sometimes we camp where there’s no signal. Besides which—oh, would you look at *that!*”

Dex gave only the barest of glances toward the spice plum Mosschap ran toward. They continued pedaling under the midday sun, telling themselves there was a very good chance of some sort of frozen dessert at the end of this slog. No further conversation arose from Mosschap, as was normal when it was trying to take the perfect shot. In a few moments, Dex knew, the silence would be exchanged for the sound of Mosschap once more running back to their side, and the conversation would resume as per usual.

Except that wasn’t what happened. The silence continued on a little too long, only to be broken by a calm phrase shouted down the road.

“Sibling Dex? I need some help.”

In their mirror, Dex saw Mosschap sitting plaintively in the middle of the road, legs stretched straight in front of itself, peering down at its own torso.

Dex hit the brakes, jumped off the bike, and ran over.

“What’s the matter?” they said as they skidded to where Mosschap sat.

“Something’s broken,” Mossicap said. The robot had its torso panel open and was trying to peer at the hardware inside, but its neck wouldn’t bend far enough. “Here, watch.” Mossicap got back on its feet. It took two normal steps, wobbled on the third, then stumbled chaotically, swaying like a precursor to a bad hangover.

“Whoa,” Dex said, steadying Mossicap with both hands. “What happened?”

“I seem to have lost my sense of balance,” Mossicap said as Dex helped them to sit.

“Yeah, no shit,” Dex said. They knelt beside the robot on the road, and the warmth of the paving bled through the fabric covering their knees.

Mossicap switched on one of the little bulbs that crowned the tips of its fingers, and pointed the light inside itself. “Can you look in there and see what’s wrong?”

“I have no idea what I’m looking for,” Dex said with concern. “I don’t know how you work.”

“I don’t really know how I work either. Just look for something visibly broken.”

Dex exhaled deeply, puffing out their cheeks. “Okay, but I’m not going to *touch* anything.”

“I won’t mind if you do.”

“Well, I don’t want to make things worse.”

Mossicap gave Dex a chiding look. “I think you’re far more nervous about poking around my insides than I am about you doing so.”

Dex flicked their eyes up toward Mossicap’s face as they leaned in. “It’s a little weird, looking inside of you. No offense.”

“None taken.”

Weird or no, Dex took a good look around. Mossicap’s torso housed a tidy arrangement of circuit boards, wires, and mechanical configurations whose purpose Dex could only shrug at. They frowned at the unfamiliar components, trying to first make sense of the layout in full before attempting to answer the question of whether something was out of place. “Do you mind if I…” They took Mossicap’s hand by the wrist, angling the lighted finger in a different direction.

“Oh, no, not at all,” Mossicap said.

Dex moved the light around. “You’ve got a cobweb in here,” they said.

Mosscap was nonplussed. "I doubt that's the problem."

"Probably not, but do you want me to clean it out?"

"The spider isn't still at home, is it?"

"Uh..." Dex moved the lit finger closer, examining the dusty threads and keeping an eye out for anything that skittered. "No, the web's empty. Whoever built this is long gone."

"Then yes, cleaning it out would probably be for the best."

Dex pulled a handkerchief out of their pocket and gathered the aged spider silk, compressing the once-intricate net into a snarl of limp protein. They took the robot's hand once more and shone it toward the upper end of the compartment. "Oh. That ... that doesn't look right."

"What doesn't look right?" Mosscap asked.

"There's a..." Dex made a face as they attempted to map their vocabulary onto the unknown. "There's a little hook-shaped bit. Black. About the length of my index finger, but curved. I think it's made out of oil plastic?"

"Oh, yes, I know the bit you're talking about," Mosscap said. "Or, at least, I've seen it in other robots."

"What's it for?"

"I have no idea, but I know my gyroscope is up there somewhere. Must be related to that."

Dex looked at Mosscap incredulously. "How do you *not* know what all your parts are?"

Mosscap's eyes contracted. "Can you tell me what your spleen does?"

"Well, it's..." Dex stopped, then exhaled once through their nose. "Look, the point is that little hook thing is clearly broken. It's hanging loose, and one part of it is snapped clean. It just looks ... worn out."

"Can you retrieve it?"

Dex pressed their lips together. "I can get the bit that snapped, but I'm not going to break the other part off."

"That's fine," Mosscap said.

Dex stretched their fingers out, found the weary plastic, slid it forth carefully, then held it up for Mosscap to see.

"Ah," Mosscap said. It did not study the broken piece of itself for long, nor did it take it from Dex's hand. A quietness entered Mosscap's voice, and its head bowed slightly. "That's that, then."

“That’s what?” Dex said.

“I suppose I’m getting old.” Mossicap sighed. “I didn’t expect my life to be ending yet, but I suppose it always comes as a surprise, doesn’t it?”

Dex blinked, twice. This turn was completely absurd, and they made no effort to disguise their incredulity. “Mossicap, this doesn’t look like a difficult thing to fix. What do you do out in the wilds if something breaks?”

“Well, that’s just it. It depends on *what* breaks. If it’s something I or a friend can bend or nudge back into place, that’s fine. But when things begin to break beyond repair, you have to let it happen. The only way to get replacement parts is to take them from other robots who have already died, and we don’t do that. We allow ourselves to break down, and new robots are built from our remains. That’s the way of all things in this world.”

“Okay, but you’re hardly falling apart. It’s one tiny bit.”

“A tiny bit that I can’t fix on my own.” Mossicap’s tone was sad, but accepting. “There’s no escaping entropy.”

“Gods around,” Dex groaned. They held the broken plastic up for emphasis. “We could *glue* this, probably. If I sprained my ankle, I wouldn’t lie down on the road and be like ‘Guess I’ll die here.’”

“Your ankle would heal on its own,” Mossicap said. “It’s not the same for me. I can’t grow a new...” It gestured at the object in Dex’s hand. “Whatever this is.”

“Do you never use anything to patch yourself up?”

The robot thought. “I have seen others do some rather ingenious patching of minor damage with clay, or propolis. It doesn’t last forever but buys you more time. That sort of thing is acceptable.”

Dex turned the plastic over in the palm of their hand, looking at the cracked edge. “Yeah, I don’t think clay would be strong enough,” they said. Their eyes widened. “Wait a sec. I know what we can do.”

“What?” Mossicap said.

“Just so I’m clear,” Dex said. “It’s okay for you to use foreign materials to make minor repairs?”

The robot nodded. “Yes.”

Dex snapped their fingers and pointed at Mossicap, smiling. “We’re going to Kat’s Landing.”

“I thought we were going to the monastery in Eastspring,” Mossicap said.

“Eastspring doesn’t have what we need right now.”

“And that is?”

“A printer,” Dex said. “We’re going to make you a new bit.”

Mosscap’s head whirred. “You want to ... manufacture something new for me?”

“Yeah. Would that be okay?”

Mosscap stared off into the distance, its eyes fixed on nothing. “No robot has had newly manufactured parts since the Transition.” The staring continued, as did the whirring. “I ... honestly don’t know what to say to that.”

“I don’t want to push anything that isn’t okay by you,” Dex said. They meant that sincerely. “But we’re not talking about replacing circuits or something, right? It’s just mechanical. It’s not brain surgery.”

Mosscap nodded, slowly. “I follow the logic,” it said, “but I’ll need to think about it. This has never been done before, and I’m ... I’m not sure.”

“That’s fair,” Dex said. “How about we head to Kat’s Landing regardless, and you can think on the way? If we get there and you don’t want to do it, that’s absolutely fine. This is *your* decision. We can try some glue or something as a plan B.” Dex looked at the road ahead. This stretch of the Riverland highways was familiar enough that they didn’t need to consult the map on their pocket computer. Their memory of the curves and turns sufficed. “It’ll take us maybe ... hmm ... three hours from here? And it’d be a nice place to stop, regardless of what you want to do.”

“What else is there?” Mosscap asked.

“Fishing, artists, people who work in hydro. It’s a funky old town—hasn’t changed much since the early Transition. There are some newer buildings, but it’s mostly river-builds.”

Mosscap’s expression became interested. “What’s a river-build?”

Dex thought about how to explain, then shook their head. “It’s one of those things you just kinda need to see.”

“Consider my curiosity piqued,” Mosscap said. “But how am I to get there, if I can’t walk?”

Dex glanced back at the wagon. The interior was too short for Mosscap, but that wasn’t the only space worth using. They gave the storage crates tethered to the wagon’s roof a quick up-and-down. “Give me a minute, and I’ll shuffle some boxes around,” they said.

Mosscap's decorative mouth widened with slow excitement. "Oh, Sibling Dex, do you mean—"

"Yep," Dex said, getting to their feet. "I'm gonna take you for a ride."

★ ★ ★

A river-build, as it happened, was whatever its creator wanted to make out of whatever they had on hand. Back in the day, the Lacetail River had been choked with refuse, and the landfills peppering the surrounding area brought problems without end. During the Transition, nets that hadn't seen fish in years were put to use hauling out every errant object that didn't belong in a healthy waterway. The people who called the Riverlands home became masters of repurposing, and their settlements quickly drew in landfill miners of a similar ethos. Nowadays, the waters of the Lacetail were clean and thriving. Whatever garbage couldn't be given a second life had been carted off long ago to the underground waste bunkers where unusable things were sealed away, a buried reminder of old sins.

The tamer junk scavenged by the riverfolk remained the backbone of a village like Kat's Landing. There were houses made of plastic, of old tires, of shipping crates painted every color a human eye could perceive. Cracks bestowed by age were patched with modern touches, like mycelium or bacterial cement, giving an impression like that of broken teacups mended with gold—a lasting beauty, born out of brief destruction.

Some of the river-builds stood on the grassy banks, but just as many bobbed on the water itself, buoyed by old rain barrels or perched upon stilt-like supports made from discarded plumbing pipes. Everything there was constructed to withstand the moods of rising tides and heavy rains, but resilience had not been the builders' only intent. Flights of fancy could be found everywhere. There were windmills and whirligigs made of old-fashioned bicycle wheels, mosaics crafted from bottle caps and resin, sculptures decorated with splashes of forbidden materials sporting colors found nowhere in nature. It was a town built of trash, but its current incarnation transcended that unseemly origin. Kat's Landing was a feast for the eyes—dazzling, in an eccentric way. Every time Dex's travels took them through there, they found something new to see.

Of course, this time, the residents of the river village were taking in a new sight of their own. The usual sort of crowd had gathered as the wagon had approached, along with the usual staring and gaping and murmurs. Dex quickly took control of the situation. “We’ll have plenty of time to chat,” Dex said to the crowd, “but we actually need some help. I’m looking for your printer.”

The crowd shuffled as a person made his way forward: a thirty-something man with floral tattoos and a tidy beard dyed turquoise blue. Dex recalled seeing him before. They couldn’t say whether they’d encountered him at tea service or just around town, but what *was* for certain was that he had a smile that made Dex’s knees go as wobbly as Mosschap’s.

“I’m the printer,” the gorgeous man said. “What can I do for you, Sibling?”

“Not for me.” Dex gestured at Mosschap, who was still perched atop the wagon. “My friend here busted something and needs a replacement part.”

“Oh, don’t you worry, he makes real good hardware,” an old woman in the crowd said. “He’s printed about half my boat engine by now.”

“Yeah, but I don’t have a template for *robot* parts,” the printer said, though he did not look discouraged by this. He craned his head over his shoulder. “Mr. Logan, if I can’t get you your new galoshes until tomorrow, that okay?”

“That’s fine,” someone replied.

The printer turned back toward the wagon. “Well, let’s get you to my shop and see what we can do. I’m Leroy, by the way.”

“Lovely to meet you, Leroy,” the robot said. “I’m Mosschap.”

Leroy grinned. “Yeah, I know.”

Dex helped Mosschap climb down from the wagon. As soon as it was on the ground, the robot leaned in to whisper to them. “Did you tell the people here we were coming?” It swayed dramatically as it tried to walk, and the sound of the crowd rippled at this.

“Nope,” Dex said. They looped an arm tightly around Mosschap’s midsection, supporting it against itself as it stumbled along.

“Then how does he know my name?” Mosschap asked.

Leroy, who was fully within earshot, answered cheerily. “You’re a pretty big deal,” he said. He waved for them both to follow him down the floating walkways. “Come on, let’s see what we can do for you.”

Mosscap's head whirred loudly as it stumbled along. "Sibling Dex, are we *famous*?" it said in hushed wonder.

"We're a known quantity, for sure," Dex said. The fact that this extended to Dex as well wasn't something they were overly keen on. They didn't mind Mosscap being in the spotlight, but they'd seen their own face pop up on a news site or two, and while they didn't *hate* it, they didn't love it, either.

The print shop Dex had remembered seeing on previous visits was easy to spot—if not for the big ventilation duct sticking out the top, then for the freestanding letters on the edge of the solar roof. Each was made of a different material and color, and spelled out the words *FAB SHACK*. A waterwheel turned amicably alongside the small building, powering an unseen generator.

"Welcome, welcome," Leroy said casually as he walked through the door.

"Oh, goodness!" Mosscap cried. It moved with animated excitement, momentarily forgetting its lack of balance and nearly bringing Dex down. "Look at all this!"

Dex had been in countless fab shacks, but they had to admit, Leroy's was really nice. Workshops like these were often cluttered, but this one was about as close to pristine as such a place could get. One wall featured sample objects, hung from hooks so visitors could get a feel for the materials before placing an order. There was a shovel, a bicycle helmet, a pair of swimming goggles, a pocket computer frame, a full set of dishes, a single waterproof boot, an artificial hip, a toy boat, kitschy jewelry, and more besides. The opposite wall held built-in shelves, filled with storage boxes of the materials Leroy needed for his work. A service counter divided the single room, standing before a small army of print machines waiting at the ready. Upon the counter itself stood a computer terminal, a pint-sized shrine to Chal, and a plate holding a half-eaten sandwich and an untouched apple. The latter items looked hastily abandoned.

"Sorry to bug you in the middle of lunch," Dex said.

Leroy breezily dismissed the comment. "Do not apologize about the coolest visitors I've ever had." He looked at Mosscap. "Do you need to sit down?"

"I don't *need* to sit," Mosscap said, "but I'd very much like to."

“I need you to sit,” Dex said. It was obvious Mosschap had never leaned on anyone before, and Dex’s shoulder was beginning to object.

Leroy got a chair for Mosschap and a glass of lemonade for Dex, then washed his hands and fetched a wooden stool for himself. He sat before Mosschap, toolbox at the ready. “So, how do we...”

Mosschap opened its torso with a smile.

“Wow,” Leroy said. He shook his head and let out a laugh before leaning in with a flashlight. “Wow, this is *not* how I thought my day would go.”

“The thing you’re looking for is near the top, toward the back,” Dex said, watching closely over Leroy’s shoulder. Everything about the man said that this was someone skilled and trustworthy, but all the same, Dex wasn’t going to let a stranger poke around Mosschap unsupervised. “This little black—”

“Yeah, I see it,” Leroy said. “The curved thing with the snapped edge?”

“Yeah,” Dex said. “I’ve got the other half in my pocket.”

“Is it okay to remove it?” Leroy asked.

“It should be,” Mosschap said. “It doesn’t seem to be anything vital, my obvious issues with gravity aside.”

“Looks like something I can disconnect pretty easily, but...” Leroy paused.

“I don’t feel pain,” Mosschap said reassuringly. “I don’t feel *anything*, in a physical sense.”

“Good to know.” Leroy rubbed his beard as he thought. Dex couldn’t help but notice how precise the trim was, and imagined how soft the dyed curls would feel. They gave their head a tiny shake and refocused. It had been a long minute since they’d last gotten laid, but now was hardly the time.

Leroy stood up, opened a drawer behind the counter, and hummed to himself as he selected a few tools, choosing each with careful consideration. Once equipped, it took him almost no time at all to work the component loose.

Dex looked Mosschap in the eye. “You don’t feel any different, right?”

Mosschap thought for a moment, then shook its head. “No, no change at all.”

“Good,” Dex said, exhaling with relief. “That’s good.”

Leroy held the broken thing up to the light, turning it over and back. “This should be a breeze to print,” he said. “Can I see the other half?” Dex reached into their pocket, then handed the requested object over. Leroy held the halves together like puzzle pieces and nodded. “Let’s get this in the scanner.”

“Can I watch?” Mosschap said.

“Of course,” said Leroy.

The scanner was like every other Dex had seen: a flat, glowing pad hooked up to a computer, with a moving gadget suspended above that took measure of whatever its operator wanted to use as a template.

“Hey, don’t look directly at the light,” Dex said to Mosschap as the robot leaned toward the scanner with interest. “It’s not great for your...” They paused. “It’s not great for *my* eyes, but I guess I don’t know about yours.”

Mosschap looked at Dex. “I’ve never had such a warning before,” it said, and then went back to watching the scanner. “I sincerely doubt this will cause me damage. It’s hardly the brightest thing I’ve looked at.”

“What’s the brightest thing you’ve looked at?” Leroy asked with interest.

“The sun, of course,” Mosschap said. “What’s brighter than that?”

Dex raised an eyebrow. “You can look directly at the sun?”

Mosschap reflected Dex’s surprise back at them. “Can you ... not?” It looked between Dex and Leroy, who both shook their heads. “Oh, that’s so unfortunate. I’m very sorry.” It returned to watching the scanner head slide back and forth, back and forth.

Leroy smirked with amusement at Mosschap’s interest in the machine, then turned to the computer monitor, making sure the template was being written properly. He gave a small nod, then looked to his customers. “All right, while that’s compiling, let’s talk printing materials.” He gestured at the storage rack, which was filled with spools of printer filament and bins of meltables. “I’ve got casein, pectin, chitin, sugar plastic, potato plastic, algae plastic—”

“Wait,” Mosschap said. It stared at the rack. “These are all bioplastics, yes?”

“Yeah, of course. Biodegradable but made to last. I can print things as sturdy or flexible as you need. Casein or sugar plastic would probably best match the consistency here, but—”

Mosscap continued to stare. “You’re saying I could have an *organic* component.”

Leroy smiled. “I’m saying you can have anything you want.”

The robot looked overwhelmed. “Where ... where do these materials come from? How do you get the casein, for example?”

“From milk,” Leroy said. “Or bone. Whatever people don’t eat.” He pointed at a stack of spools on the rack. “I don’t know specifically where *this* casein comes from, but I know the pectin I’ve got is sourced from a citrus farm out in the Crossroads.”

“And the cows, they’re happy?” Mosscap said. “They’re well kept? And the citrus trees as well?”

Leroy glanced ever so briefly at Dex, his eyes questioning. “How do you know if a citrus tree is happy?” he asked Mosscap.

Dex could tell Mosscap had fallen prey to some newly realized tangent, and decided to chase it down before it strayed too far. “What’s up?” they asked, leaning on the counter and facing Mosscap directly.

“Well, I—I hadn’t considered the implications of this.” Mosscap rubbed its hands together. “I hadn’t thought about the fact that *another being* would produce the materials necessary for my repair. A being I’ll never even get to meet!”

Not for the first time in recent weeks, Dex found themselves at a loss.

Leroy again looked between the two. “Do you mind if I finish my sandwich?” he asked.

“Go right ahead,” Dex said. They crossed their arms, settling in. “You do realize the materials he’s got here are *way* better for the world than oil plastic, right?”

“Of course,” Mosscap said.

“And also, you mentioned propolis as a patching material. *That* comes from another being, too. A whole bunch of other beings.”

“If I wanted to harvest propolis, I’d have to stick my hands in a bee colony,” Mosscap said. “I’d be *very* well acquainted with where it came from. But if I chose casein for my replacement part, I’d never know what cow I owed my thanks to.”

Mosscap gave Dex an expectant look, waiting for a reply. Leroy did the same, quietly munching his sandwich.

Dex rubbed the outer corner of their left eye. If they'd wanted constant debates, they thought, they would've stayed in seminary. "The thing in you that broke is made of oil plastic," they said, trying a different tack. "And oil plastic is *also* made from other beings, right? It's all that's left of a countless number of very, very dead things. You've got fossil leftovers wired all through you, but you'll never meet *those* beings, either."

"Those leftovers are so far removed from what they were," Mosschap said. "It's not the same as *milk*. Not to mention oil plastic has been altered."

"Bioplastics are, too," Leroy said. "I couldn't print you something from straight-up milk."

"Yes, but still, it's close enough to the original source that it biodegrades. And that is what ultimately separates the organic from the synthetic, is it not? All ingredients on Panga had to first *exist* on Panga. Everything is natural in origin, but if you turn it into something that nature can no longer recycle, then you've removed it from that realm entirely. It no longer has a part to play. Just like me. I'm an observer, not a participant."

"Wow," Leroy said. He popped the last bite of sandwich into his mouth and picked up his apple. "This is a lot."

Dex sighed. "I promised you I wouldn't push this," they said to Mosschap. "And I won't. But I don't see the difference between patching yourself with something you find out in the wilds and what Leroy's offering here."

"And perhaps there is no difference," Mosschap said. "But I don't know. I don't know how I feel about having an organic component. Part of me thinks that would be simply marvelous. What better way to be a student of nature than to have a piece of it within me? But then ... would I be changing something fundamental about *my* nature?"

Dex frowned and gestured at the broken part on the scanner pad. "This doesn't seem to have anything to do with your consciousness."

"Well, I don't know that, do you? I don't know why I have consciousness any more than you do. This bit's not part of my processing core, true, but—I mean, think about your own body. Your skeletal genes shouldn't have any connection to your ability to get a good night of sleep, but they *do*, for reasons no one knows."

"You've lost me," Dex said.

“Skeletal genes. Research shows there’s a correlation between them and a tendency towards insomnia.”

Dex blinked. “The hell have you been reading?”

“Everything,” Mosschap said.

Leroy took a loud, crunching bite of his apple, looking entertained.

Dex rubbed their face. “I really don’t think this bit has anything to do with your ... your *you*. You said you don’t feel any different.”

“I don’t,” Mosschap admitted. “Not that I can tell. Do I seem different to you?”

“Not at all. I really think it’s fine. It’s not like we’re making you into a ... a cyborg or something.”

“A what?”

“A cyborg. You know, like in stories?”

“No. What is that?”

“It’s a ... a made-up thing. Half person, half robot.”

Mosschap’s lenses shifted. “Is it a monster?”

“Kind of. I don’t know; I’m not into that stuff. I just know it’s a thing.”

“What an odd notion. But you do bring up a good point. I am an object, not an animal. Would I become something different if I am no longer entirely synthetic?”

“No,” Leroy said. “Not at all.” He looked at Dex. “I know this is a personal question, Sibling, but do you have any sort of prosthetics? A pin in your shin, maybe? Or something little, like a filling?”

“Yeah,” Dex said. “I’ve got a couple fillings.”

“What’s a filling?” Mosschap said. “A filling of what?”

“Of holes in my teeth.” Dex pointed at their jaw. “And they’re filled with ceramic, as a matter of fact. So, I guess I’m not one hundred percent organic myself, if you get right down to it.”

“And you don’t feel any different for it?”

Dex laughed. “No. I don’t even remember that I have them most of the time. I cannot stress how unimportant fillings are in my day-to-day life.”

The robot thought quietly. “You’re saying your bodily components do not affect the essence of who you are.”

“Of course they do,” Dex said. “Why else would we decorate our bodies or change them altogether?”

Mosscap was perplexed. “So, which is it? *Are you your body, or are you not your body?*”

“Both,” Leroy said.

“And neither,” Dex said.

Mosscap looked between them. “This is very obtuse,” it said, sounding a bit frustrated. “I’m sorry, I’m trying to understand. Your consciousness arises from your body, just as mine does. Unconscious matter gives rise to a conscious self.”

“That’s right,” Dex said.

“In that sense, you *are* your body.”

“Yes.”

“But the self is also *more* than just the sum of the base-level parts.”

“Also yes.”

“So ... your body is simultaneously *you* and *not* you.” Mosscap’s head whirred so loudly, it sounded as though it might take flight. “Where do you draw the line, between body and self?”

Dex didn’t know what to say.

Leroy shrugged. “That’s between you and the gods.” He took another bite of his apple.

Mosscap looked at the colorful spools of filament for a moment longer. “I need to consider it.”

“Absolutely,” Leroy said. “I heard you when you said you’re an object, not a person—do I have that right?”

“Yes,” Mosscap said.

Leroy nodded, chewing both a bite of apple and that thought with equal slowness. “Okay. Still, though, I think we’d be going about it wrong if we treated this like any other machine fix. It *is* a prosthetic we’re making here, and when I make prosthetics for people, I always tell them to take however much time they need to think about what they want. I get that you’re different, but it’s the same thing, I think.”

The robot looked at Leroy gratefully. “I appreciate that very much, thank you.” It turned its head to Dex. “Is that all right?”

“Of course,” Dex said. “We can hang out in town until you know what you want.”

Leroy set his apple down and leaned forward on the counter. “Well, if you’re gonna stay *here*,” he said, folding his hands together seriously,

“we’ve gotta give you a much better welcome.”

★ ★ ★

The people of Kat’s Landing knew how to party.

By sundown, the village had been transformed, and everyone who lived there seemed all too happy for a reason to celebrate on a whim. String lights hung in festive sine waves. Glowing lanterns bobbed in the water. A band jammed mellow on a floating platform, and the smells of fire-crisped fish and sizzling shells filled the warm air of a summer’s night.

Dex lounged cross-legged in a cup-shaped chair hanging from a pole near the end of a dock, a plate of goodies balanced on their ankles. They put one arm behind their head and sighed contentedly before picking up yet another skewer of battered crawdads with the other hand. The memory of their unpleasant ride to the village was fading fast, and in its absence, they were more than happy to sit and eat and do nothing.

Mosscap was out on the water, in the back of the speedboat belonging to the old woman who’d vouched for the printer’s handiwork that morning. She tore around the water at a speed befitting someone a fraction her age, deftly piloting her craft around the lit-up buoys that ostensibly kept her and her passenger safe. Dex couldn’t hear what she and Mosscap were saying to each other, but their cheers and laughter rose above the hum of the engine and the splash of the water. There was no doubt they were having a fantastic time.

Leroy approached Dex’s chosen spot, carrying two tall glasses filled with something purplish. “Mind if I join you, Sibling?” he asked. He lifted the drinks with a smile. “I don’t come empty-handed.”

Dex accepted the offering gladly. “I was getting thirsty,” they said, smiling into Leroy’s eyes as they took the drink. It was some kind of boozy punch, thick with muddled herbs and berries. Dex and Leroy saluted each other, then each took a sip. “Gods, that’s perfect,” Dex said.

“We have it good here,” Leroy said, settling into a chair hanging opposite Dex’s.

“You certainly do.” Dex gave the bear pendant around their neck an acknowledging rub with their thumb. “Thank you again, for your time earlier. I hope we didn’t screw up your day.”

“Oh, not even a little,” Leroy said. “You made it a great one.” He looked out at the water as twin peals of laughter arose from the speedboat, and chuckled. “Glad to see Ms. Amelia found herself a willing victim.”

“Is that her name?” Dex asked.

“Mmm-hmm,” Leroy said. “And Mosschap’s braver than me. I wouldn’t get in a boat with her.”

“Why not?”

Leroy gestured toward the water, holding his palm flat to emphasize the spectacle before them. The boat careened at reckless angles, water spraying wildly to either side.

Dex laughed. “Mosschap’s waterproof, at least.”

“Mosschap’s lucky,” Leroy said, “to find someone as kind as you to look after it.”

Dex warmed under the compliment but squinted at the phrasing that came after. “Mm, I’m not its keeper. Our arrangement isn’t like that.”

“What is it like?”

Dex thought. “You ever had a friend come visit from somewhere else? Somewhere far away, where they do everything different? You have to show them around, teach them what the food is, how the tech around your house works, what counts as good manners?”

“Sure,” Leroy said.

“*That’s* what it’s like,” Dex said. “Mosschap’s my friend, and I’m just showing it around. It did the same for me, out in the wilds. Human lands are my neighborhood; everything else is Mosschap’s. It’s an exchange, pure and simple.”

Leroy sipped his drink, peering at Dex with keen interest. “I heard a rumor you were out in the Antlers. Past the Borderlands.”

The comment made Dex feel a touch exposed. Their choice to head out that way had been made in solitude, and their reasons for doing so were private. To have that time and place become folded into Mosschap’s public story was an odd feeling. They took a moment before replying. “Yeah,” they said at last. “I was.”

To his credit, Leroy seemed to glean Dex’s mild discomfort, and his tone as he continued was gentle. “What’s it like, out there?”

Dex exhaled, and decided to embrace the vulnerability. “Beautiful. Frightening. It makes you understand why we don’t live out there

anymore.”

They hadn't noticed before, but Leroy was wearing Chal's sugar bee on a charm bracelet around his right wrist. He gave this a little rub, just like Dex had with their pendant. “And Mosschap helped you find your way through?”

“Yeah,” Dex said. “It did. I don't know what would've happened to me out there if we hadn't run into each other. I either would've turned around or...” They shrugged. “I dunno.”

“Then you're both lucky.” Leroy took another contemplative sip, never taking his eyes off Dex. “Nobody can go it alone.”

“Robots can,” Dex said.

“Yeah, but that one looks like it loves company.” Leroy turned his attention to the water and laughed once more at the nautical antics, shaking his head.

Dex took an oh-so-casual sip. “Don't we all?”

The question landed exactly where Dex hoped it would, and a sparkle appeared in Leroy's eye. A slow smile crept across his face. “Y'know, Sibling, I was wondering...”

“Yeah?” Dex said.

Leroy's smile grew. “Well, if your friend doesn't need you around tonight, would you ... like to spend it at my place?”

Everything that had annoyed Dex about the day became instantly worth it. “Yeah,” they said. “I would.” They set their plate aside and got to their feet.

“Oh—now?” Leroy said.

Dex grinned at him. “Do you have somewhere else to be?”

Leroy laughed with happy surprise. “Well ... okay, then. All right.” He stood and held out his hand.

Dex took it and felt their pulses greet each other, buzzing with the impulsive promise of something good for the soul. They headed back down the dock together, drawing closer with each step. The lights of the party flickered on the water, and the stars answered them above.

★ ★ ★

Fond as Dex was of their own bed, it was nice, for a change, to wake up in someone else's. As it turned out, Leroy's home and the fab shack were one

and the same. He had a large room behind his work space, and much could be read in how it was arranged. His bed was low and spacious—easy to fall into, hard to get out of. The kitchen nook was basic but well stocked with simple, healthy things. There was a big armchair with a high-performance sound system behind it, speakers angled toward where a head would rest. Knickknacks and artwork filled the empty spaces but not in a cluttered way—just a few carefully chosen things that each hinted at a story.

The wall opposite the bed was almost entirely composed of floor-to-ceiling windows, and when Dex opened their eyes that morning, the river was the first thing to say hello. Leroy was the second, though he hadn't awoken yet. Dex smiled at the sound of his sleeping breaths and at the scent of the recently laundered sheets that cradled them both. Outside, a small parade of mud ducks paddled by. A turtle basked on a sunbaked rock. A crane thrust its long neck into the water, came up empty, and continued the hunt. Dex propped themselves up on a pillow, enjoying every sight and smell and feeling without weighing them down with any thought more complicated than perception.

They glanced at their pocket computer lying faceup on the bedside table. More messages had appeared in their mailbox, patiently waiting. Dex took a brief glance. More requests from the City, all from people they didn't know. Would Mossap want to make recordings for the historical archives, their mailbox asked? Would they be open to adding a third public meeting at the University, as the first two had already filled up? The Mechanics' Guild had invited them both to a formal dinner, but now their hosts were rethinking—would it be more polite to organize something for Mossap that didn't involve food?

Dex turned their computer off and returned to the sheets and the ducks.

There was a knock at the door, quiet but clear. Dex looked over at Leroy; their host remained asleep. After a moment's consideration, Dex extricated themselves from the bed as stealthily as they could. Another knock came as they looked around for their clothes. They put on their own pants and Leroy's shirt, then padded barefoot through the shop and to the front door, where the knocking continued.

Dex opened the door to find Mossap on the other side, knuckles raised mid-knock. In its other hand it grasped a polished wooden cane, which it

leaned heavily on. “Good morning, Sibling Dex!” the robot said. “Congratulations on having sex last night.”

A laugh came from behind where Mosschap stood, and Dex craned their head to see Ms. Amelia, the speedboat owner, leaning on a similarly styled cane and continuing to laugh behind her hand. There was an empty pushcart behind her—presumably the means by which she’d brought Mosschap to the fab shack. She gave Dex a cheery wave, her eyes crinkling merrily.

“Uh,” Dex said. Their cheeks grew warm, and they cleared their throat. “Thanks, Mosschap.”

The robot beamed. “Ms. Amelia was *very* helpful in teaching me the social norms surrounding such behavior. I’m still not sure I understand it in full, but she made it quite clear that I should *not* disturb you, even though I would love to know the particulars of how you—”

Dex cleared their throat again. “Uh, yeah.” They nodded at the old woman. “I appreciate it, Ms. Amelia.”

Ms. Amelia nodded back, and looked at Mosschap. “I should get home,” she said. “The cats will be cranky without their breakfast. But you are welcome in my house anytime.” She pointed at the cart. “You want me to leave this for you?”

“No, thank you,” Mosschap said. “Hopefully, I won’t be needing it once I leave.”

As Ms. Amelia and Mosschap exchanged parting pleasantries, Dex heard movement inside the building. They left the door open and walked back into Leroy’s home, where the man of the house had put a kettle on the stove and a pair of pants on himself.

“Hey,” Dex said with a sly smile.

Leroy returned the look as he set two mugs on the short counter that served as an eating space. “Hey,” he said.

Dex jabbed a thumb in the direction of the front door. “Mosschap’s here. It kinda sounds like it’s made a decision. About the replacement, I mean.”

“Oh,” Leroy said. He opened his fridge. “Well, that’s great.”

“Do you want me to have it wait in the shop while you get about your morning?”

“No, no, it’s welcome back here,” Leroy said. He lifted up a bowl of speckled duck eggs and a bundle of mixed greens tied with twine. “I assume it doesn’t need breakfast?”

Dex chuckled. “No, it doesn’t.”

Leroy’s smile tugged itself a little higher up one cheek. “And what about you?”

“I would love breakfast,” Dex said.

Leroy nodded happily and got to work.

The sound of the front door closing echoed through the shop, followed by uneven clanking steps as Mosschap limped its way into the room. “Good morning, Leroy!” Mosschap said. “Congratulations on—”

Dex interrupted it as fast as possible. “Mosschap apparently spent the night at Ms. Amelia’s,” they said.

“Oh, yes, it was wonderful,” Mosschap said. It took a seat on one of the stools at the counter. “I got to play with her cats, and she showed me her art studio, and she has a beautiful collection of *paper books*. They’re so much easier to read when they don’t fall apart.”

Leroy cocked his head at this as he cracked an egg into a bowl; Dex supplied an explanation as they sat on the other stool. “There were paper books at the hermitage we visited out in the Antlers,” they said. “We salvaged some to bring to City University, but most were ... well, falling apart.”

“I see,” Leroy said, cracking another egg. He gestured at the bowl. “I hope it was safe to assume you like omelets.”

Dex smiled brightly. “I love omelets,” they said, and it was true.

Leroy gave them just a hint of a wink and continued to cook.

“Is this customary?” Mosschap whispered to Dex as Leroy fetched some herbs from the pots on his windowsill. “In some of the books I read last night, people made each other breakfast after having sex, but not universally.”

Dex threw Mosschap a look and lowered their voice as far as it would go. “What kind of books does Ms. Amelia collect?”

“Oh, entirely pornography,” Mosschap said. “It was very educational.”

Dex noticed Leroy doing an admirable job of making no expression whatsoever. “Breakfast isn’t customary,” Dex whispered. “But it’s ... it’s very nice when it happens.”

“I can see how it would be,” Mosschap said approvingly. It paused. “Oh, dear, should I leave? Am I intruding?”

“I think it’s okay,” Dex said. Leroy had made eye contact with them by this point, and he seemed to be taking the third wheel in good-humored stride. Dex made a mental note to return to Kat’s Landing before all too long. “So,” Dex said, raising their voice to a normal volume. “Have you thought about what you’d like to do here?”

“Yes, I have,” Mosschap said. “Though I’m wondering if it’s possible.”

“Shoot,” Leroy said.

Mosschap folded its hands on the counter. “Could you melt down the part of me that broke, and use that to print a replacement?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s easy,” Leroy said. “Recycling oil plastic takes a little longer, because I’ll need to process it safely, but if you don’t mind the wait, then yeah, absolutely.”

“Wonderful,” Mosschap said, sounding relieved. “Then that is what I would like to do.”

Dex put an elbow on the counter and leaned their jaw against their fist. “Can I ask why?”

The robot sat for a moment, considering. “I don’t want to separate myself from other robots any more than I already have,” it said. “I am having the most incredible experience out here. I’ve seen species of trees that don’t live in my part of the world. I’ve been on a boat. I’ve played with domesticated cats. I have a *satchel!*” It gestured at the bag hanging at its side for emphasis. “A satchel for my belongings! I am doing things no robot has ever done, and while that’s marvelous, I ... I don’t want to become removed from them. The aggregate differences I have are only going to increase as we continue along, Sibling Dex. It’s very nice to be famous, but I don’t know how I feel about it yet, and I’m beginning to wonder if it’s a trait I’ll have among my own kind as well. So, you see, it’s enough that I’m experientially different; I don’t want to be *physically* different, too.” It paused. “Does that make sense?”

“Yeah,” Dex said with a fond smile. “Yeah, it does.”

Leroy watched the two of them with a touched expression. “I’ll go warm up the grinder,” he said, leaving breakfast prep where it lay. “We can start the melt while we eat.”

“Anything I can do to help?” Dex asked.

Leroy squeezed Dex’s shoulder as he passed by. “Nah,” he said. He paused, noticing what Dex was wearing. “Is that my shirt?”

Dex laughed awkwardly. “Sorry,” they said. “I was hurrying, and—”

“No, it’s cool,” Leroy said. He continued on his way to the workshop. “You should keep it. Looks good on you.”

Mosscap leaned forward once Leroy was gone. “Is exchanging items of clothing customary?”

Dex’s cheeks grew hot. “No,” they said.

“*Ohhhh.*” Mosscap raised both hands to its angular chin. “Ms. Amelia would have something to say about that, I think.”

“Please,” Dex said fervently. They shut their eyes. “Don’t tell Ms. Amelia.”

4

THE COASTLANDS

Finding the ocean was as simple a matter as letting a river lead you in the direction it wanted to go most. There were many options of where a person could head once the air took on a bite of salt, but Dex had chosen Shipwreck Margin, for the uncomplicated reason that they liked the look of it and thought Mosschap would too. It was a contemplative place, its silvery waters punctuated with boulders carved by the strange hand of the tides. There were beaches nearer the City with pillowy sand and playful waves, but Shipwreck was not of that breed. The currents here were as unforgiving as the toothy predators that navigated their pull. The shoreline was carpeted with stones in need of a few more epochs before they became sand, and the cliffs they'd been ground from towered over the pounding surf, their edges sharp and scabrous.

But despite Shipwreck's foreboding demeanor, life thrived in this place. Black-feathered seabirds nested in crevices unreachable without wings, and spruce trees clung to the cliff edges, stunted yet defiant in the briny mist. Softer touches were abundant, if you knew where to look. Sea strawberries grew from even the darkest gaps, and matte-orange gemstones hid among the pebbles. And there were people in this part of the world, too, clustered here and there in settlements no bigger than a dozen or so families, making a life on the bleeding edge of where a terrestrial animal belonged.

These scattered villages were easy to spot from the clifftop Dex had parked the wagon on. Mosschap observed its new surroundings with keen interest, peering through the binoculars it had acquired the week before. "Their dwellings look very simple," Mosschap said as it surveyed.

Dex nodded as they set up the folding chairs. They didn't need to look to know what Mosschap was talking about—modest, sturdy shelters made of spruce planks and driftwood, a short distance from the jetties where small

sailboats would return at the end of the day, hauling back whatever had been caught with a hand-pulled net.

“I’m so looking forward to going to the beach, Sibling Dex,” Mosschap continued. “I haven’t spent much time around littoral ecosystems, and it’s been years since I did so.”

Dex sighed as they found themselves standing at the inescapable entry point of a conversation they’d been putting off and could no longer avoid. They’d spent days agonizing over the best way to bring this up, and had considered doing it sooner, but Mosschap had been having such a good time in the Riverlands that Dex hadn’t wanted to rain on the parade. They knew this was a subject Mosschap would get deep in its own head about, and Dex had felt it kinder, in the end, to limit that sort of wheel-spinning as much as possible.

This choice did not make broaching the topic any easier.

“Mosschap, there’s...” Dex stuck their hands in their pockets and sucked their teeth. “I don’t want to bring things down, but I think we should chat about what your—what our expectations should be like while we’re here. I don’t ... I don’t know ... how much of the beach we’ll actually get to see close up.”

The robot lowered its binoculars. “Why?”

Dex exhaled. They sat in one of the chairs, and gestured for Mosschap to take the other. “Two things,” they said, as Mosschap sat. “First, most of the Coastlands is rewilded territory. *You* could walk through it, if you want to, but I can’t. There are no roads or trails in a lot of places, and the animals that live there aren’t used to people and shouldn’t be disturbed.”

“So, nesting birds and the like,” Mosschap said. “Pupping seals, that kind of thing?”

“Probably,” Dex said. “I don’t know specifics. I just know it’s not my place. I mean that literally. The human footprint along the coast is a very small one, by design.”

“That seems wise,” Mosschap said. “But what about this beach?” It angled its head toward the little wooden homes standing at the root of the cliffs.

“Well, that’s the second thing.” Dex sought their words with care. “The villages that *do* exist here ... may not be overly welcoming to you and me.” They sighed again. “You in particular.”

“Oh,” Mosschap said. The robot was taken aback but did not react strongly. It merely folded its hands in its lap and looked at Dex, seeking understanding. “Why?”

Dex puffed out their cheeks and leaned back in their chair. “The folks here, by and large, aren’t cool with modern technology. Any technology, really, beyond the most basic basics.”

Mosschap’s eyes shifted. “You touched on this before, back at the hermitage. But you didn’t explain.”

Dex began to do exactly that. “Some people went in kind of an extreme direction after the Transition. They think tech is a slippery slope that heads right back to the Factory Age, so they don’t use anything automated. Most don’t use electricity, except maybe for heating, and even that’s not a given. Some use animals to help with pulling and lifting things, but a lot of them just stick to what they can carry on their own. And that’s fine—that’s their choice. They can live how they like. But they also are known to get prickly about people bringing mainstream tech into their space. When I do tea service here, I rarely go into town. I usually just park on the outskirts and let people come to me if they want to. Like we’re doing now.”

“Why don’t they want you close by?” Mosschap said.

“Because I have an electric kettle,” Dex said. “And an ox-bike. And a pocket computer. And a fridge. You get the idea.”

Mosschap looked down at its metal frame. “If they don’t like ox-bikes or electric kettles, I can see how *I* might pose a problem.”

Dex screwed up their face in apology. “Yeah.”

The robot ran its hand over the exposed components of its midsection, as if seeing itself for the first time. Dex already hated making Mosschap think about this. They knew Mosschap to have unshakable belief in its intrinsic value—*I know no matter what, I’m wonderful*, it had proclaimed back in the wilds—and watching it silently question its own body made Dex want to return to the highway and forget this whole leg of the trip.

Mosschap looked back up, the light in its eyes lower than before. “I’ve never felt like a problem,” it said. “Not a very good feeling, is it?”

“Do you want to go?” Dex said. “I’m serious. I’m sorry, I should’ve told you sooner, and that’s on me. We don’t have to—”

“Yes, we do,” Mosschap said decisively. “I’m here to meet humanity, and these people you’ve described are just as much a part of it as you are. I

wouldn't be doing a very good job of pursuing my quest if I only welcomed the parts that were fun."

A flicker of admiration arose within Dex. They reached over and squeezed the robot's wrist. "Okay," they said. "But it's your call. The second you change your mind, we're out."

Mosscap patted Dex's hand. "Agreed."

"And don't think of yourself as a problem," Dex said, a protective edge entering their voice. "If they have an issue with you, that's on *them*. And it's not even about you, personally. They just ... don't understand what you are. Or maybe they can't fit you into their beliefs, and that scares them. The unknown makes us stupid sometimes."

Mosscap considered this seriously. "Like elk," it said.

"Sorry?" Dex said.

"Elk don't understand robots, either. We confuse them, and that makes them afraid, and then they can get ... well, disagreeable." Mosscap nodded to itself. "I never take it personally, with elk. You have to let them come to you instead of you going to them." Its eyes brightened a touch. "I understand that." It shifted to face them directly. "Have you ever been charged by an elk, Sibling Dex?"

"I ... have not."

"Mmm," Mosscap replied. It looked out at the sea. "I don't recommend it."

★ ★ ★

Robot minds and human minds had a key difference between them, and Dex had learned it well in the past few months. For as distracted as Mosscap could be whenever something new and interesting entered the scene, it was equally capable of devoting itself to a single task indefinitely, without need of diversion. No matter how easy-going Dex thought themselves, there was no competing with a being whose cohorts were out in the wilds, watching stalagmites form and saplings grow. A human mind was perpetually restless by comparison, and that was how Dex found themselves as the day dragged on without any visitors from the villages below. To pass the time, they cleaned their bike. They made some lunch. They answered

some messages. They tended their herbs within the wagon, took a short nap, then reorganized a cupboard that had been annoying them for weeks.

Mosscap, on the other hand, sat in its chair. It didn't read, or talk much. It didn't seem to move. It simply waited in patient hope for people who might never show up.

Until at last someone did.

A stranger approached, walking up one of the cliffside trails. They were middle-aged, fit and trim with a pepper-grey braid. They wore a knit sweater to fend off the fog, which made for a funny juxtaposition with the open-toed fish-leather sandals strapped to their feet. Dex waved to them as they approached, and Mosscap did the same, transitioning in a blink from its silent vigil into animated excitement. The stranger paused for the briefest of moments to raise an eyebrow as they absorbed the sight of the robot, then gave a nod of acknowledgment. At first blush, Dex got the impression of a person who took even the most extraordinary occurrences in stride.

"Hello there," Dex said. They fell easily into the mode they so often adopted for tea service—a practiced, smiling, friendly performance of themselves. "Please, join us."

The stranger walked up, looking at Mosscap with the same casual gaze as before. "Well, you are something, aren't you?" they said.

"I am Mosscap," the robot said with a polite bow of its head. "And this is my friend, Sibling Dex."

"Pleased to meet you both," the stranger said. "My name's Avery."

"We're glad you're here, Mx. Avery," Dex said, establishing a congenial mood but adding nothing further. They'd learned, with encounters such as these, that their role was to smooth out any bumps in whatever conversation would follow, but only as necessary. They had become a translator, of sorts. A chaperone. A shepherd. They would keep Mosscap on the rails and break the ice if it grew too thick, but ultimately, these moments were about Mosscap and the other person, and not about Dex at all. In some ways, their profession had prepared Dex well for this. Building a canvas for others to explore themselves on was rather the point of monastic service, after all.

Mx. Avery pulled a leather waterskin from their satchel and took a long sip of whatever was inside. "That trail's always easier going down," they said. They looked at Mosscap. "How do those metal feet of yours do on steep trails?"

“Very well,” Mosschap said. “They have excellent traction, and my sense of balance has never been better.”

“I’m glad to hear that, because I’d like to extend an invitation.” Mx. Avery capped their waterskin and returned it to their bag. “Would you like to come down and go fishing with me? Just off the dock; we don’t need to bother with a boat.”

To say that Dex was surprised by this was an understatement. They glanced at Mosschap, ready to follow its lead.

Mosschap was smiling, but its head whirred. “I would love to join you, yes,” it said. “However, I don’t participate in hunting behavior myself. Would I have to ... take part?”

Mx. Avery shrugged. “You can do whatever you’re comfy with. I can get you a pole, or you can sit and watch. Suits me the same either way.” They looked at Dex. “Same goes for you, Sibling.”

“I’m not very good at fishing,” Dex said, “but...” They caught Mosschap’s eye and confirmed this was how the day was going to go. “Sure. Let’s do it.”

★ ★ ★

The doors of the village were shut when their group reached the bottom of the cliff. All the homes were on stilts, standing high above the sand, but Dex could see flickers of movement through their windows. A curtain was pulled shut as Mosschap drew near. A couple of kids in another house pressed their noses against the glass, only to be shooed away by the shadow of someone larger. Dex hoped Mosschap hadn’t noticed, but it didn’t take long for the robot’s eyes to grow dim and distant. Upon seeing this, Dex reached out and took Mosschap’s hand, holding it tightly as they followed Mx. Avery to the dock. Robots didn’t hold hands with each other, Dex knew, but humans did, and by the way Mosschap squeezed its metal fingers in response, it was clear it understood the gesture.

Mx. Avery gave a little shake of their head as they continued toward the water. “Ignore them,” they said disapprovingly of their townsfolk. “It’s my home just as much as theirs, and I want you here.” They looked Mosschap in the eye. “Not very neighborly of us, is it?”

“It ... is a little disheartening,” Mosschap said, honest and calm. “I’m trying not to take it personally, as Sibling Dex encouraged me to do, but I have to admit, this is proving to be a difficult day.”

Mx. Avery gave a sympathetic smile. “Day’s not over yet.”

The three of them arrived at the dock, stepping from loose stones onto weather-beaten wood. A heap of fishing gear was waiting at the end of the structure, accompanied by a trio of seating cushions set out in a row. It seemed their host had anticipated the invitation would be accepted.

Mx. Avery opened a palm toward the fishing poles. “Well, what do you think, Mosschap?” they said. “You want to give it a go, or you want to watch?”

“I’ll watch, thank you,” Mosschap said.

“Okay,” Mx. Avery said. They picked up two poles and extended one toward Dex. “Sibling?”

Dex took it and ran their fingers over the hand-polished wood. They’d never used a pole like this before, but the function of it was no different from that of a printed one. Fishing wasn’t that complicated.

Mosschap leaned in with interest toward Mx. Avery’s pole. “How does it work?”

“You bait this,” Mx. Avery said, holding up the hook. “Then you drop it in the water, and ... you wait.”

“What do you wait for?”

“For the fish to bite the hook.”

“I see,” Mosschap said. “Very clever. Tools do make this easier, don’t they? I always feel for bears, standing in the water with their mouths open all day. The young ones look so disappointed.” It leaned in closer, studying the hook. “What do you bait it with?”

Mx. Avery reached down, picked up a small box with holes drilled in the top, and opened the lid for Mosschap to see.

“Oh!” Mosschap gasped with surprise. “Purple crawlers!”

Mx. Avery laughed at the robot’s reaction to the wriggling ball of worms. “You know them, huh?”

“Yes, but...” Mosschap looked back at the village standing on the rocky shore. “Where do you get them? They’re forest dwellers. They live in topsoil.”

“I have a bin of them at home,” Mx. Avery said. “They eat my food scraps, and then I use them to get more food.”

“You farm worms,” Mosschap said slowly, trying to clarify. “In a bin.”

“I guess so, yes.”

“And then you put them on a hook.” It looked up. “Alive?”

Mx. Avery nodded. “Best way to get a fish’s attention.”

Mosschap pondered this, its head whirring with consternation. “What an utterly confusing life and death that must be.”

Dex reached over and took a worm from the box before they could fall into an existential crisis about it. They baited their hook with a whispered apology.

The three of them sat on the cushions, Mosschap in the middle. It watched keenly as Mx. Avery and Dex both lowered their lines into the splashing water below. “How long does it take?” Mosschap asked.

“Long as it needs to,” Mx. Avery said. They made themselves comfortable and smiled at Mosschap. “That’s why it’s a nice thing to do with someone to talk to.” They held their fishing pole between their knees, then reached over and retrieved a battered old canteen from the assorted equipment. “Tea, Sibling?” they offered. “Won’t be half as good as what you make, I’m sure, but—”

“Oh, no, that’d be great, thank you,” Dex said.

Mx. Avery took two wooden cups from a stuff sack and began to pour. “So, where’ve you been, before here?”

“We were in Steelhead last,” Mosschap said.

“And we’re your first stop on the coast?”

“Yes.”

Mx. Avery nodded as they handed Dex a full cup. “And where’re you headed?”

“We’ll continue southeast through your territory,” Mosschap said, “and then through the Shrublands, and on to the City.”

“You taking the City Highway or the Twenty-Six?” Mx. Avery said.

Mosschap looked at Dex, asking for an answer.

“Probably the Twenty-Six,” Dex said, holding their fishing pole with one hand and their cup in the other. They breathed in the drink as it cooled, instantly recognizing the scents of bee weed and preserved lime. “It’s a longer trip but a nicer ride.”

“Sure is,” Mx. Avery said. “The Twenty-Six greenbelt’s gorgeous this time of year. You’ll have to watch out for marsh hawks, though—they get feisty if you get close.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Mosschap said. “I’m personally more familiar with the black-tipped hawk, but they’re closely related. I’ve had to duck while walking through a nesting ground many a time. They certainly like to go for the eyes, don’t they?”

Mx. Avery chuckled. “That they do.”

Mosschap thought for a moment. “I’m curious, Mx. Avery, if you don’t mind—”

“I don’t,” they said, even though the subject was unvoiced.

“I’m mildly surprised by your knowledge of the Shrubland greenbelts. I’d been given to understand that people in your community are—”

“Shut-ins?”

“I was going to say *insular*.”

Mx. Avery chuckled again. “That we are. But we do have the ramble. Nobody in my village does it except me anymore, but I still count.”

“What’s the ramble?” Mosschap asked, leaning toward Dex.

“It’s a traditional thing around here,” Dex supplied. “You’re encouraged to regularly spend a month or so walking through the adjacent territories, so you can get a taste of how other folks do things.” They looked to Mx. Avery. “Would you say that’s right?”

Mx. Avery nodded. “That’s the long and the short of it. I go every year, and I usually take the Twenty-Six. Not every time, though. It’s good to mix it up, not have too much of a plan.”

“How does it suit you?” Mosschap asked. “Life in other villages?”

“Oh, it’s very nice,” Mx. Avery said. “Very comfortable. Very easy. Hard to leave, sometimes.”

“Yet you always come back.”

“I do,” Mx. Avery said.

“May I ask why?” Mosschap said. “Because I’ve noted with Sibling Dex here”—the robot nodded toward them—“they do very poorly in the world without technological assistance.”

Mx. Avery let out a hearty laugh. “Would you agree with that, Sibling?”

“Absolutely,” Dex said, unabashed. “No offense to you, Mx. Avery, but I need a heater and a hot shower.”

“I respect it, I do,” Mx. Avery said. “Nobody likes a cold bath.” They turned their attention to Mosschap. “But that’s exactly why I come back after going elsewhere. Me and mine believe the further you distance yourself from the realities of what it means to be an animal in this world, the more you risk severing your connection to it. History tells us loud and clear where that road goes.” They gave the robot a respectful nod. “I don’t need to tell you that.”

“Well, I wasn’t there for it,” Mosschap said. “For the factories, I mean.”

Mx. Avery looked puzzled, so Sibling Dex stepped in, explaining how the factory robots dismantled and rebuilt themselves into new generations, opting to mirror Bosh’s cycle rather than live on indefinitely.

For the first time in the conversation, Mx. Avery seemed thrown for a loop, but even this was expressed subtly. They sat in silence, eyebrows raised high. “That certainly is something to think about,” they said at last.

Mosschap was deep in thought as well, but evidently on a different thread. “So, you prefer to be uncomfortable?” Mosschap said.

“Of course not,” Mx. Avery said. “But I think there’s such a thing as *too* comfortable.” They grinned. “I’m guessing our tea-slinging friend here would disagree.”

Dex rubbed their lips together and chose their words with care. “It’s not my place to debate different flavors of belief in the places I visit,” they said. “I’m just here to serve tea.”

“Such a diplomat,” Mx. Avery said. “You an Ecologist?”

“No, I’m an Essentialist.”

“Ahh,” Mx. Avery said, as though that explained everything. “I like Essentialists. Don’t agree, of course, but I appreciate your style.”

“What ... what is that?” Mosschap asked.

Dex arched their neck as they tried to sum up sectarian nuance in as few words as possible. “In the barest basics, I believe that though we can—and *should*—get close to the gods, it’s impossible to understand them or the full nature of the universe, so we have to build a society that is best suited to *our* needs,” Dex said. “And as a disciple of Allalae, that means I think we’re allowed to use whatever we want to make ourselves as safe and comfortable as possible, provided that we don’t damage the natural world or hurt one another in the process.”

“I see,” Mosschap said. It looked to Mx. Avery. “And what is *your* understanding of Allalae, as someone who forgoes many comforts?”

“Oh, no, no. I don’t see it that way at all,” Mx. Avery said. “On the contrary, our way of life shows you how comfortable the world is on its own. Paring things down makes the small comforts all the sweeter. You don’t know how to be grateful for a well-sealed wall if you haven’t had a winter storm bust through a weak one. You don’t know how sweet strawberries are unless you’ve waited six months for them to fruit. Elsewhere, they have all these little luxuries, but they don’t understand that food and shelter and company are all you really need. The world provides everything else without our meddling.” They smiled at Dex. “What do you say to that, Sibling?”

Dex smiled back. “I’d say there’s no harm in any sort of construct so long as said construct has been proven to *do* no harm.”

Mx. Avery’s eyes twinkled as they looked at Dex. “We could have a very good argument about that,” they said.

“I have no doubt we—” Dex’s words cut off abruptly as the fishing pole jerked in their hand. “Oh, shit,” they said. “Mosschap, can you—” They handed their cup to the robot and got to work with both hands, reeling the line in as fast as they could.

“There we go!” Mx. Avery said, putting their pole between their knees once more and scrambling through their gear. They produced a landing net and leaned over Mosschap’s lap so as to get closer to Dex. “Sorry, Mosschap.”

“Should I—” Mosschap began, looking around as though it should move.

“You’re fine,” Dex said quickly, still fighting against the hidden pull.

A few spins later, and the fish emerged with a loud splash, writhing in the sudden lack of pressure as Dex hoisted it upward. It was a little longer than Dex’s forearm, and its silver scales gleamed in the daylight.

Mx. Avery held the net in one hand and skillfully grabbed the fish with the other, holding it as still as they could within the woven fibers. “Sibling, can you—”

Dex lay the pole down on the dock and removed the hook from the fish’s mouth. With that, the flurry of human activity ceased, and Mx. Avery set the flopping net on the boards behind them so that they could all examine the catch.

“It’s a…” Dex pursed their lips. “Well, it’s a fish.”

“It’s a mirrorback,” Mx. Avery said. “They’re real tasty.” They pointed at a brownish stripe running horizontally from head to tail. “That means it’s already laid eggs and won’t do so again. So, it’s fine for us to take.”

“It’s beautiful,” said Mosschap. The robot was fascinated but exhibited none of its usual glee. It looked between Mx. Avery and Sibling Dex. “How do you kill it?” A note of grief had entered its voice, but there was acceptance there, too, born out of a lifetime of watching wild things eat and be eaten.

Mx. Avery seemed to note the shift in Mosschap, and their tone likewise became more somber. “Well,” they said slowly. They looked at Dex for a brief moment; Dex gave them a nod, letting them know it was okay. “We let the air do that for us,” Mx. Avery said.

Mosschap said nothing in response to this. It kept its glowing eyes on the fish, studying the gill flaps as they spasmed in the presence of oxygen they couldn’t use. Mosschap watched and watched, and the longer it did, the harder Dex found it to do the same. They’d been fishing bunches of times, had plenty of fish die in their immediate vicinity, eaten more of their kind than they could count. But as they tried to watch as Mosschap did, they became uncomfortable, almost like they were witnessing something that wasn’t their business.

But it *was* their business. They were the one who’d pulled the fish out of its watery home. They were the one who’d stepped in and decided that it was time for something’s life to be over because they were hungry and their own life required it. Mosschap was right to look as unflinchingly as it did. Dex was ashamed that they hadn’t, before.

Mosschap reached out its hand. With an aching gentleness, it lay its fingers on the animal’s dying body. Its eyes became focused, and it bowed its head closer.

“It’s all right,” Mosschap murmured, its metallic voice thick with respect and sorrow. “I know. It’s not fair. But it’s all right. It’ll be over soon.”

Mx. Avery stared at Mosschap, their gaze as conflicted as Dex felt. They hesitated for a moment, then put their hand on Mosschap’s shoulder as they, too, watched the fish’s movements begin to slow. Dex did the same, a silent prayer to Bosh running through them. All three sat still, and together, they held vigil as something that had never existed before and never would again ceased its struggling and came to an end.

5

THE SHRUBLANDS

“Can we go over it one more time?” Mossicap asked.

“Sure,” Dex said as they pedaled through the dappled shade.

Mossicap began to tick things off on its fingers as it walked beside the bike. “Nora and Theo are your mother and father.”

“Yes.”

“They are currently still partners.”

“Also yes.”

“They have a partner named Abby. She wasn’t involved in raising you.”

“Not very much,” Dex said. “She didn’t move in until I was in my teens. But we get on well.”

Mossicap nodded. “And your father has a partner named Jasper.”

“No,” Dex corrected. “My dad has a partner named Felix, and he has a son named Jasper. Jasper is my stepbrother.”

The robot frowned at the mistake. “And you didn’t grow up with Jasper.”

“No. Dad and Felix got together after I’d already moved out, and then Jasper decided to move to the farm a few years after that.”

Mossicap’s head whirred. “But you *did* grow up with your sisters.” It began to count on its fingers again. “Violet, Sadie, and you. In that order. You’re the youngest.”

“I am indeed.”

“And Violet—no, Sadie is the sister you share both parents with, biologically.”

“Yes.”

“Violet is Nora’s daughter, and her father is ... oh, no...”

“Radley,” Dex supplied.

“*Radley*,” Mossicap said with a sigh. “Yes, he and your mother were together, and then they weren’t, and now she’s with your father, but they’re

still the best of friends.”

“He’s basically my second dad,” Dex said. “He and Liz have lived next door forever.”

Mosscap turned its head in confusion. “Who’s Liz?”

“Radley’s partner.”

The robot looked defeated. “And then there are your aunts, and uncles, and cousins. And your sisters both have partners and children of their own.”

Dex gave Mosscap a grin. “The cousins do too.”

Mosscap groaned wearily. “I know you’re of a social species, but *goodness*, Sibling Dex. I’m never going to get this right.”

“You don’t have to,” Dex said. “It’s always chaos there, and nobody will expect you to navigate it. You’ll see—my dad mixes up the little kids’ names all the time.”

“I just want to make a good impression,” Mosscap said. It looked away to watch a bird fly by. “Meeting your family is a very different sort of occasion than meeting strangers.”

Dex laughed. “It’s not like you’re moving in, Mosscap. You can make any sort of impression you want.”

“Yes, but—oh, no!” Mosscap’s lenses widened with worried realization. “I haven’t brought a gift!”

Dex tried to keep their eyes on the road. “Why would you need a *gift*?” they asked.

“People do that in books,” Mosscap said. “When they come to stay at someone’s home. Isn’t it customary, to bring a gift to your host?”

“Well ... sure, but—”

“I need a gift, Sibling Dex,” Mosscap said firmly. It paused. “I’ve never given one before. What sort of item is appropriate?” It opened its satchel and began to dig around. “I have some very good rocks. I don’t wish to part with my binoculars. What about clothespins; would they like clothespins?”

“Why do you have—” Dex dropped it. “Tell you what. There’s a fruit stand on the way there, and they usually have cherry wine. A couple bottles of that would be a nice gift.”

“Oh, good,” Mosscap said. It ceased its rummaging and walked more confidently along. “I will trade some pebs for cherry wine and give it to my hosts. Ha!”

“Why is that funny?” Dex asked.

“Because it’s so very human, and I am not. And it’s not funny, it’s *delightful*. It’s the same as knowing how to calm a wolf by rolling over, or how to make sun jays identify themselves.”

Dex blinked. “How to do *what*?”

“Every sun jay has an identifying call,” Mossicap explained patiently. “A name, if you like. There’s a sound they make that instructs any other sun jays in the area to sound off and let them know who’s in the neighborhood.”

“And you know how to do that?”

Mossicap beamed. “Let’s see if there’s anyone around.” It opened its mouth and let out an uncanny imitation of a raspy corvid croak, loud enough to echo through the branches above. A silence followed, and then, from not too far away, an answering squawk called back, followed by another more distant, yet unmistakably distinct.

“Whoa,” Dex said. They laughed. “That’s really cool.”

Mossicap gave a nod of agreement. It turned its gaze toward the trees, presumably searching for the individuals it had been speaking with, but something else caught its eye. “Oh, that’s lovely,” Mossicap said.

“What is?” said Dex.

Mossicap pointed. “Crown shyness is so striking, don’t you think?”

Dex had no idea what Mossicap meant. “Sorry, *what*’s striking?”

“Stop,” Mossicap said. “Look.”

Dex sighed, but they hit the brakes, put their feet on the paving below, and looked up.

Mossicap continued to point, tracing lines in the air. “Look at the treetops,” it said. “What do you notice?”

“Uh,” Dex said. They frowned, not knowing what Mossicap was getting at. There were branches, obviously, and leaves, and ... “*Oh*. Oh, they’re...” They fell quiet as their perspective of the surrounding landscape shifted in a way they’d never unsee.

Despite their number and close proximity, none of the treetops were touching one another. It was as though someone had taken an eraser and run it cleanly through the canopy, transforming each tree into its own small island contained within a definitive border of blue sky. The effect reminded Dex of puzzle pieces laid out on the table, each in their own place yet still unconnected. It wasn’t that the trees were unhealthy or their foliage sparse. On the contrary, every tree was lush and full, bursting with green life. Yet

somehow, in the absence of contact, they knew exactly where to stop growing outward so that they might give their neighbors space to thrive.

“How...” Dex began to ask.

“No one knows,” Mosschap said. “At least, not to my knowledge. Some say it’s to minimize competition. Others think it’s to prevent the spread of disease. But as to how the trees know when to hold themselves back, I don’t know. It’s a mystery.”

Dex gave an inward nod to Samafar as they continued to observe the strange phenomenon. “I’ve never noticed it before,” they said, and this bothered them. They’d grown up around there. They’d ridden this road dozens of times. The pattern of the trees was spectacularly obvious, now that they were observing it, but it had always been the backdrop to Dex. The wallpaper. They’d never been looking for it. Now they couldn’t see anything else.

“I’m surprised you weren’t familiar with crown shyness,” Mosschap said. “You’re so knowledgeable about plants.”

“I know herbs and ornamentals,” Dex said. “I don’t really know trees, just some of their names.”

“Well, that’s the nice thing about trees.” Mosschap put its hands on its hips as it looked around. “They’re not going anywhere. You can take all the time you need to get to know them.”

★ ★ ★

It was always a strange thing, coming home. Coming home meant that you had, at one point, left it and, in doing so, irreversibly changed. How odd, then, to be able to return to a place that would always be anchored in your notion of the past. How could this place still be there, if the you that once lived there no longer existed?

Yet at the same time, in complete contradiction, seeing that said place *had* changed in your absence was nothing if not surreal. Dex felt this as they approached the road leading to their family’s farm, just as they felt every time they made the trip. The road was the same, but the fence had been mended. The field was the same, but the greyberry bushes had been cut down to the root. The farm was a place where Dex knew they would

always be welcome but never in the same way as before they left; a place they knew intimately and no longer knew at all.

Dex pulled off the road shortly after rounding the last corner, and parked the wagon beside the old oak tree they'd climbed many a time when they were small. They put down the brakes, grabbed a bag of clothes, and locked the wagon door.

"Why are you leaving the wagon here?" Mosschap asked. It looked around. "I don't see any buildings yet."

"Because we're early," Dex said. "And we want to be *less* early."

"Why?" Mosschap asked.

"You'll see," Dex said. "Besides, it's a nice walk, and you'll see more of the farm this way."

The road curved back and forth like a lazy stream, and the two of them followed comfortably along. They passed the orchard, where grass hens and speckled quail scratched for bugs in the thick grass below. They passed one of the many pastures, its soil at rest beneath a cover crop of radishes, lentils, black oats, and rabbit clover the hungry herd would devour in the coming year. They passed the pond that served as the last filter for the farm's greywater, startling a gossiping group of ducks back into the lily-filled pool. Dex and Mosschap paused there for a few minutes to watch a horde of blue-backed dragonflies patrol the airways, then continued on—past the intentionally untended field filled with solar panels and beehives, past the orderly clusters of domed greenhouses, past the workshop and the tool shed and the root cellar, until they came at last to the center of it all.

The cluster of houses at the heart of the farm was as varied as the people within them. Some were built of wood, but most of cob. The eldest home was likewise the largest: a stately old farmhouse holding court in the middle, crowned with a green roof and a wind turbine. A lovingly maintained deck unfolded on all sides, providing plenty of welcoming nooks for anyone who wanted to kick up their feet and sit awhile. But nobody was outside as Dex and Mosschap approached. Everyone was indoors, but unsurprisingly, Dex had no problem hearing them.

"Is everything all right?" Mosschap asked, carrying a beribboned bottle of cherry wine in each hand. "Sounds like quite a commotion."

"No." Dex sighed. "It sounds like dinnertime."

They walked up the ramp toward the front door, their footsteps thumping against the well-oiled cedar. The dogs were the first to notice, barking in thunderous chorus as they burst out of the open doorway. There were three of them, all shaggy herders painted in soft swirls of brown and black, smart as hell when they were at work and big dumb mops every other hour of the day.

Dex planted their feet in anticipation of the onslaught of jumping and licking and whimpering. “Mosschap, this is Burt, Buster, and Buddy,” Dex said as they patted heads and rubbed ears. “Yes, hi, hello.” They glanced toward the door, seeing the movement that followed in the dogs’ wake. “And here’s—”

Here was everyone else.

The crowd that appeared was as familiar to Dex as the scenery on the road. It wasn’t just the faces and the voices but the aprons, the field clothes, the dish towels tossed over a shoulder or two, the hands covered in dough that still required kneading, the cheeks red from an argument hastily dropped, the pant-leg that had something spilled upon it, and the volume at which everyone shouted hello. But just as Dex hadn’t known about the mended fence or the cut-back berries, they also hadn’t expected Abby’s new glasses, or that Felix had shaved his beard, or how their nibblings had somehow kept growing since Dex visited last. The overwhelming mix of old and new engulfed Dex as they were hugged and kissed from all sides, and they tried their best to stay afloat in the ensuing sea of conversation.

You’re early! How was the ride? Do you need a snack? A shower? How are you, sweetie, it’s been so long! How’s the wagon? Did you bring tea? You look slimmer than last time; are you eating enough? We saw your picture in the news; isn’t that something? Did you see the new shed? The new goats? The new wind catch? You sure you don’t want a snack? Buster, get down! Do you want a haircut while you’re here? Not that it looks bad, no, just thought you might like a trim—

Dex realized, amid the loving assault, that Mosschap was getting the same treatment, and oddly, they found this to be a relief. They hadn’t known how their family would react to the robot, and had wondered if they’d perhaps turn into the same speechless crowd Dex encountered in nearly every town they went to. But it seemed that Dex’s clan had worked out whatever

nervousness they'd had about their unusual visitor well ahead of time, and instead were treating Mosschap as just another guest fresh off the road.

Gods around, look at you! Welcome! We're so glad you're here. Can I touch you? Is that okay? How was the trip? Oh, my goodness, you didn't have to bring us anything! Aren't you sweet. You don't eat, right? What about power, do you need power? We can plug you in somewhere if you— Oh, oh, you can charge yourself, that's neat. Would you like to see the goats tomorrow? What about the bees? We can open up a hive, if you want. Do you need to sit down? I don't know what to offer. You're so tall! Has Dex been eating well? They're looking slim.

The cohesion of everyone focusing on the new arrivals did not take long to disintegrate, as Dex knew would be the case. A timer went off in the kitchen, one kid took another's toy, the dropped argument was remembered, the dogs started biting one another's faces, and so on, and so forth. One by one, folks splintered off to attend to whatever preparations had occupied them before, leaving only those who weren't as concerned by things left undone: the kids.

There was a small pack of them, clustered around Mosschap with wide eyes and giddy laughter. Mosschap knelt down, as it had learned to do with children, and gave its best smile. "I'm happy to answer any questions you might have," it said.

The kids were silent, at first, until one of them summoned some bravery. "Can you fly?" he asked.

"No," Mosschap said.

"Can you fight a bear?" asked another.

"I haven't tried," Mosschap said. "Why would I want to?"

"Does anything eat robots?" said one.

"No," Mosschap said.

"Could we eat a robot?" laughed one who thought herself hilarious.

Mosschap's eyes shifted with mild concern. "... What?"

Dex watched the proceedings from the background, leaning against the railing of the deck. A hand came to rest fondly on their shoulder, and they knew who it was before looking.

"Hey, Mom," Dex said, leaning their head into hers.

"Hey, bug," their mother said, turning her face and kissing their scalp. "It's so good to see you." She hugged Dex with one arm. On her opposite

hip, she carried Charlotte, the newest member of the bunch, who was happily gnawing the shoulder strap of her grandmother's heavy-duty overalls. Charlotte cooed with curiosity at Dex, and Dex's mom smiled at them both. "Wanna say hi to your niece?"

"Oh, absolutely," Dex said, taking the baby into their arms. "Gods around, Charlotte, you got *big!*"

Charlotte flashed a toothless grin at her name, drooling on her shirt in the process.

The kids were still babbling their unpredictable questions at Mosschap, but the robot's focus became captured by the tiny person in Dex's arms. Dex noticed Mosschap's interest, and suddenly realized they'd never seen Mosschap encounter a baby before. *Could that be right?* they thought. There had been babies in the villages they'd been to, surely. It wasn't as though Charlotte was the only infant on Panga. But now that they were thinking about it, Dex couldn't remember ever seeing Mosschap get close to a baby, and from the look on the robot's face, there was nothing in the world it wanted to do more.

Dex took a few steps forward. "You want to hold her?" they asked.

"Oh, yes," Mosschap said with an almost-urgent seriousness. "But I don't know how."

"Let me show you," Dex said. Gently, they transferred the baby from their hands to Mosschap's, instructing it on how to support her. Charlotte hadn't figured out her head the last time Dex had been there, but she could hold it up easily now, and as soon as she turned to see what it was that was taking her, she fell dead silent.

Mosschap did as well, excepting the mechanical excitement within its head.

The two stared at each other, eyes wide and mouths open, gobsmacked with wonder. After a moment, Charlotte reached out and pawed at Mosschap's face with her chubby fingers.

"Oh!" Mosschap said with surprise. "Hello!"

For reasons unknowable to anyone but her, Charlotte found the talking machine entertaining, and she giggled, batting her hand against the metal plating a little harder.

Dex's mom laughed. "I think she likes you," she said.

"How can you tell?" Mosschap asked.

Charlotte giggled again.

“Oh, I see,” Mossicap said in an excited whisper, taking note of this new behavior. “Yes, I like you, too.”

Dex’s mom caught their eye. “Do you mind if I leave her with you two for a bit? It’s all hands on deck in the kitchen.”

Dex gave her a grateful look. They knew that she knew that Dex usually wanted a minute to sit and catch their breath before getting swept up in the family melee once more. “Yeah, we’re good out here,” they said with a smile.

Their mom nodded. “Okay, monsters,” she said with a clap of her hands, getting the kids’ attention. “We’ve got a million potatoes to scrub; let’s go.”

There were a few protests, but the pack obeyed, following Dex’s mom back inside and leaving them in peace.

“*In-credible*,” Mossicap said in a hush. It looked Charlotte up and down with unbridled astonishment. She continued to giggle, until the split second in which she didn’t anymore, and instead began to kick and fuss. Mossicap became distraught. “What have I done?”

“Nothing,” Dex said. “Babies just do that when they want something.”

“What does she want?”

Dex watched the baby’s pudgy feet flail against the air. “I think she wants to be put down.”

Mossicap looked at Dex. “You don’t know for sure?”

“Well, no, she can’t tell me,” Dex said. “You just have to guess.”

“What happens if you get it wrong?”

“Then she’ll cry, and we try something else.”

With devoted concentration, Mossicap crouched down and began to lower Charlotte toward the deck, feet first.

“Oh, no,” Dex said, holding out a halting hand. “She’s too little to stand. You need to set her down on her belly, so that her hands are on the ground too.”

“Oh,” Mossicap said. The robot adjusted the angle of its hands, lowering the baby down as though she were made of glass. It let go of her, ever so slowly.

At once, Charlotte stopped her fussing. With a happy coo, she began to scoot forward on all fours.

Mossicap laughed with surprise. “She’s crawling!”

“Yeah,” Dex said dryly, eyebrows raised with amusement. “They do that.”

“All infant humans do this?”

“If they’ve got a typical body, then yeah.”

Mosscap pointed at the baby. “Did *you* do this?”

“So I’m told.”

“You don’t remember?” Mosscap asked.

Dex laughed. “You might want to pick up a book on babies. We don’t remember the first few years of our lives.”

Mosscap stared at this. “Whyever not?”

“I...” Dex paused. “I don’t know. Our brains just ... don’t save that stuff. I don’t know if it’s because they physically can’t or ... I dunno.” They gestured at the house. “You should ask someone in there.”

Mosscap continued to watch Charlotte crawl around the deck, headed no direction in particular. “You don’t *still* ambulate this way, right?”

One of Dex’s eyebrows traveled higher. “Have you ever seen me *crawl*, Mosscap?”

“No,” Mosscap said. “But could you?”

“Uh, yeah, I can crawl.”

Mosscap looked at Dex with brightly glowing eyes. “Would you?”

“What, now? No.”

The robot was a bit disappointed by this but did not press the issue. It sat down on the deck, watching the infant who apparently had places to be. “If what you say is true, then ... she won’t remember me. She won’t remember this moment.”

“I’m afraid not,” Dex said. “But we’ll tell her about it, when she’s older.”

A dejected note slipped into Mosscap’s voice. “How very sad,” it said. “This is already quite important to me.”

“Here,” Dex said, reaching into their pocket and retrieving their computer. “Pick her back up. I’ll take a picture of you two so I can show her one day.”

“Oh, what a good idea,” Mosscap said. It began to reach toward Charlotte, then paused. “Does she *want* to be picked back up?”

“We’ll find out,” Dex said.

Charlotte, as it turned out, did not mind. She reached for Mossicap's face again, trying in vain to grab its glowing lenses.

"You'll make sure she gets a copy?" Mossicap confirmed, unbothered by the grubby fingers slamming against its eyes. "So that when she starts making memories, she'll know we're already friends?"

Dex smiled. "Yeah," they said. They switched on the computer's camera and aimed. "I'll make sure."

★ ★ ★

The flower garden that all the houses shared contained four big wooden tables, and Dex had sat at them many a time on early harvest evenings such as these. Dex was accustomed to the tables being stuffed to capacity with both food and people, as was the case then. What Dex *wasn't* used to was a single topic of conversation, and to find themselves at the center of it. It wasn't a bad thing, but it was weird, and Dex didn't quite know what to do with the spotlight. That wasn't their usual role there. They were no longer sure of their place.

Otherwise, dinner was about as perfect as could be. The air was warm enough to make jackets unnecessary, yet still held an end-of-day crispness that made breathing easy. The food, as always, was tremendous. Nothing had been butchered recently, so everything on the table came from the ground or the trees, resulting in a leafy, juicy, seed-filled spread as colorful as any painter's palette. Dex showed the family their trick of doling out a portion of food for Mossicap, then claiming it for themselves as seconds. This satisfied everyone—particularly Dex's parents, who couldn't abide the idea of a guest with an empty plate.

Once the peak of the meal had passed, Mossicap got to work, moving from table to table and chair to chair, asking its question of everyone. The robot had gotten in the habit of logging people's answers into its pocket computer, and it did just that, listening seriously and typing eagerly, looking for all the world like a reporter on the beat.

Dex knew from experience that Mossicap didn't need their help once it got in this groove, and as soon as they were done eating, they felt the need for a moment in their more customary place on the edge of the action. They grabbed two bottles of beer from the ice-filled bucket, then moseyed toward

someone else who shared their penchant for the periphery: their dad. They found him in a characteristic pose, leaning his forearms against the railing, hands clasped together as he watched fireflies bob in the twilight.

“Want another?” Dex asked, raising one of the bottles.

“Only if you join me,” their dad said. He accepted the drink, clinked it against Dex’s, then resumed his post, draping an arm around Dex’s shoulders with affectionate ease. The two of them sipped and said nothing, and were very comfortable in that arrangement.

“You fixed the fence,” said Dex after a while.

“Yeah,” their dad said. “Me and Jasper took care of it a few weeks ago. Not so much of an eyesore now, huh?”

“Yeah, looks good,” Dex said.

Their dad took a sip of the beer and sighed appreciatively. “Glad you could make some time for us,” he said. “I know this thing you’re doing is a lot.”

“Well, of course,” Dex said. “As if I’d let everybody but you meet Mosschap.”

“I don’t care about meeting the robot, goofball,” their dad said. He reconsidered. “I mean, I *do* care about meeting the robot, but I’m just happy you’re home.”

The robot in question made its way over a short while later, putting its pocket computer in its satchel to signal that it was done with that part of its night. “Am I interrupting?” Mosschap asked, stopping a few feet away.

“Not at all,” Dex’s dad said. “Though I can’t offer *you* a beer, huh?”

“You could,” Mosschap said. “But I couldn’t make use of it.”

“Can’t imagine it’d be good for your insides.”

“Oh, my insides wouldn’t care.” Mosschap sat down, laying claim to a wicker chair. “I’m waterproof.”

“Really?” Dex’s dad raised his eyebrows with amusement. “That must come in handy.”

Mosschap’s lenses contracted, and it burst out laughing.

“What?” said Dex.

The robot pointed with glee. “You do the same thing,” it said to Dex. “With your eyebrows. You look exactly the same when you do that. Ha!” It clasped its hands together before its chest. “Genetics are such a *delight*.”

Dex and their dad glanced at each other and started laughing as well. “I’ve always told them I have delightful genes,” their dad joked, gesturing at Dex with his bottle. “Nice to finally have someone around here who appreciates that.” He looked between them both and smiled warmly, shaking his head. “It really is incredible that you ran into each other.” He took another sip and looked at Dex. “Were you camping out in the Borderlands, or what?”

As a rule, Dex didn’t like lying. They didn’t imagine that anyone did, aside from a rare few who needed some help, but much as they knew that it would leave a bad taste in their mouth, they nonetheless slid easily into something untrue. “Yeah,” Dex said, turning toward the field. “Yeah, just needed to get off the highway for a couple nights, take a break.”

Mosscap’s lenses shifted at this.

Dex’s dad, a man who valued the occasional night alone in a tent, nodded with understanding. “I’ve had neighbors ask the craziest shit about you,” he said. “People think you were all the way out in the Antlers, or whatever.” He laughed. “It’s weird, kiddo, hearing rumors around the market about *you*.”

Dex could feel Mosscap staring at them, asking a silent question. They ignored it. “Yeah, well, you know how people talk.” They shrugged and sipped their beer with nonchalance.

Dex’s dad took a swig as well, then turned his attention to Mosscap. “So! On to the City tomorrow?”

“That is the plan,” Mosscap said.

“Is it true they’re throwing a parade?” Dex’s dad asked.

“Uh,” Dex said slowly, “not to my knowledge.” Gods around, they weren’t *really*, were they?

“Hmm. I heard talk that they were, but ... I mean, who knows?” Their dad shrugged and looked back to Mosscap. “So, after that, then what?”

Mosscap cocked its head. “Sorry?”

Dex could tell that Mosscap had been caught off guard by the question, but his father took it to mean that Mosscap hadn’t heard him. “After the City, then what?” he repeated politely. He nodded toward Dex. “Will they lead you back home, or will you go on your own?”

“Oh.” Mosscap paused. “We ... we hadn’t discussed, actually.”

“I figured we’d play it by ear,” Dex said, picking at the label on their bottle with their thumbnail. “I don’t know how long we’ll be there, so…” They trailed off.

“When was the last time you were in the City?” their dad asked.

“Uh…” Dex said, trying to remember. “About a year ago.”

“You planning to meet up with any friends?”

“I don’t know,” Dex said. “I’m sure I’ll see people around, but we’re so busy, y’know?”

“Will you do tea while you’re there?”

Another question Dex didn’t want to answer, but this one, they could dodge honestly. “No, I haven’t done tea since”—Dex gestured at Mosschap—“since we met.”

Their dad blinked with mild surprise. “Not at all? I figured you’d set up wherever you two stopped.”

“No, we, uh ... like I said. We’ve been busy.” Dex took another sip and continued to focus on the fireflies.

To Dex’s surprise, Mosschap seized the opportunity to quickly step in. “Sibling Dex has been a wonderful guide,” the robot said. “They spend a great deal of time teaching me how everything in your society works. There’s so much I didn’t understand. So much I *still* don’t understand. I don’t know how I would have done any of this without them.”

Dex’s dad looked at them with all the love and warmth in the world. He reached over and ruffled their hair vigorously, like he used to do when Dex was little.

“Ugh, stop,” Dex said with a shy grin.

“It’s an amazing thing you’re doing,” their dad said seriously. “We’re really proud of you.” He gestured with his bottle at Mosschap. “And that reminds me. I’ve got a question for you.”

“Of course, Mr. Theo,” Mosschap said. “Anything you’d like to ask.”

Dex’s dad studied the robot with a contemplative look. “I’d like to ask you *your* question,” he said.

Mosschap’s lenses opened and closed, once. “What do you mean?”

“What do robots need?” Dex’s dad asked. The robot before him fell silent, so he expanded on the thought. “We—my family, I mean—we have everything we could possibly want here. It’s a good life. We need nothing, as I told you. But being a good neighbor is all about making sure that the

people you share land and air and water with don't need anything, either. So ... what do your people need? Are you doing okay?"

"We're not people," Mosschap said, "but..." It was clearly at a loss, and stared off at nothing. "I ... I haven't considered this before. Yes, we're ... we're doing just fine. Materially, we don't require anything beyond a full battery, and we can provide that for ourselves. We have sufficient components to continue building new generations, for a time."

"For a time?" Dex's dad repeated. "How much time?"

"I don't know," Mosschap said.

Dex's dad frowned. "What happens when you run out of stuff to rebuild with?"

"Then we go extinct, so to speak," Mosschap said. "Just as everything does. Just as humans will, one day. No other living thing knows when their line will come to an end, so we haven't bothered to calculate it, either. That would do more harm than good, I think."

This answer clearly surprised Dex's dad, who had the same thrown-off look most people did whenever Mosschap made comments of that sort. "So..." He took a moment to reestablish his conversational footing. "You have all your basics. Just like we have here."

"In essence, yes."

"Well, that's good to hear," Dex's dad said. "But you keep asking *us* the question, even though you know *our* basics are covered. So, then: what do *you* need, Mosschap? You, personally."

Dex watched as Mosschap struggled to answer this, its head whirring as loudly as a kicked hive. "This is going to sound foolish, I'm sure, but I hadn't thought to consider it before," Mosschap said. "I ... I don't have an answer for that. I'm sorry, but I don't know."

Dex's dad shrugged, not fussed either way. "Well, if you do, at some point, I'd love to know what it is," he said amicably. "But I'm glad you're all okay out there." He sipped his beer and leaned once more against the railing, resuming his contented repose.

Dex tried to do the same. They made it look as though they had, behaving no outwardly different than before. But inside, something began to coil around itself. Despite how much they loved the good man standing beside them, part of them wished they were back on the road.

6

THE DETOUR

This should have been the easy part. It was a straight shot from the Shrubland villages to the City, and the road between was smooth as could be. There were no big hills, no rough spots, no need to camp along the way. Just a half-day ride from here to there, and at the end, they'd find all the delights that had drawn Dex to the City in the first place: restaurants, museums, art galleries, rooftop patios and vertical forests, farms built underground, gardens that nearly touched the clouds, artwork painted on buildings, buildings that were artwork in their own right, music and theater and spectacle and light and ideas and color and walkable streets that were never, ever the same twice, no matter how often your feet followed them. Mosschap would love the City, Dex knew. There were dozens of places they were excited to share with it. And much as their schedule was starting to make Dex sweat, it *was* important for Mosschap to visit the University, the libraries, the monasteries—everywhere that served as a nesting ground for people whose whole lives revolved around understanding the past or shaping the future. The City was the center of Panga's nervous system, the locus where every thread that ran through the world braided together. Mosschap had come out of the wilderness to ask questions. There was no better place for that purpose than this.

And yet: every push of the ox-bike's pedals felt as difficult as it had been out in the wilds, slogging up the oil road. It wasn't a matter of physical exhaustion. Dex was well rested, well fed, fit as could be. But as their body moved forward, everything within tugged back, and the longer the morning went on, the more frenzied that silent fight became.

Mosschap was uncharacteristically silent alongside them, and Dex had no desire to make small talk. The air between them was heavy enough as it was, thick with bugs and things unsaid. The feeling became denser as they

headed onward, and Dex couldn't stand its weight any more than they knew how to break it.

It was the robot, in the end, who knocked the wall down. Mosschap stopped in the middle of the road, standing in the sunny space between two wildlife corridors that arched over the creamy pavement. "Sibling Dex, I am wondering if there are any sandy beaches around here," it blurted out. "It occurs to me that given the time of year, we're in the thick of marblehead laying season, and it's something I've never seen, and I know that particular species of turtle is endemic to this part of Panga, and ... I ... I was just wondering."

Dex stopped the bike, put their feet down, and looked back. They and Mosschap stared at each other from their short distance apart, eye to eye, unwavering. "Do you mean ... you wanna go now?" Dex said slowly.

"I..." Mosschap fidgeted with the strap of its satchel, its many belongings clattering against one another. "The turtles only come out during a full planetrise, and that *is* today, so I ... I know we are meant to arrive in the City this afternoon, but I wonder if it would make that much difference if we were a day late." It fixed the buckle on the satchel's strap, which did not need fixing.

Dex thought, and thought some more. This was stupid, but all the same, an unshakable want arose in them, the same sort of nameless, senseless, rebellious magnetism that had made them turn off the highway into the wilds months before. Smacking down everything within themselves that began to argue, they walked the bike around, turning the wagon in the opposite direction. "It's about six miles to Cloud Beach," they said. "People go there every year to watch the turtles. There's a little festival around it—no music, obviously, but people bring food, and there's lots of kids, and—"

"I was thinking—I was thinking somewhere more private," Mosschap said. The satchel strap had transformed into a helix in its hands. "You know how it is; sometimes you just want to have a moment between yourself and a turtle and no one else." Its eyes were wide and piercingly bright. "I don't think I want to see any people today, Sibling Dex. Other than yourself, I mean."

Mosschap stared down at the road, and Dex looked away, not wanting to make the robot more uncomfortable. They continued to think. "I know a spot," they said at last. "I haven't been there in forever, and it's hard to get

to, and I can't promise no one will be there, but..." They looked back. "It'll be a longer ride."

This last comment was a question; Mosschap nodded in assent. "I don't mind, if you don't," it said.

"Okay," Dex said. They got back on their bike. "Okay. Let's go."

★ ★ ★

The spot Dex knew had no name. The road leading to it was unmarked and in poor repair, barely extant the farther they went along. It was the sort of place you went when you were a teenager in possession of a bottle of wine you shouldn't have and a few friends who would all share your regret about varied decisions by morning. Brambles stretched untrimmed into the space Dex rode through, scratching their arms and snapping in the wagon's wake. Once they passed through this unpleasant barrier, there was, as Mosschap had requested, a beach. It wasn't anything special, as far as beaches went. It was small, forgettable, littered with old seaweed and abandoned shells. The beach wasn't dirty, but neither was it overly scenic. It was a place where land met water. That was about all that could be said about it.

Mosschap observed the area as Dex brought the wagon to a halt. "Yes," it said with relief, watching the waves push and pull. "Yes, this is perfect."

Together, they coaxed the wagon out onto the sand until they came to a stopping point as good as any other. Without a word, they began to make camp, just as they'd done countless times before. Dex locked down everything with wheels, Mosschap unfolded the kitchen on the wagon's exterior, Dex fetched chairs, Mosschap started the fire. Or, then again, Mosschap *started* to start the fire but froze midway through. The robot stood unmoving in front of the fire drum, the line to the biogas tank dangling unconnected in its hand.

"What's wrong?" Dex asked.

Mosschap looked at them. "I want to build a wood fire," it said. "I don't want to use this."

"Why not?"

"I just ... I just don't!" Mosschap sounded frustrated, petulant, more like the kids back at the farm than like itself.

Dex stuck their hands in their pockets. “We don’t have any firewood,” they said.

Mosscap gestured broadly at the beach around them. “There must be driftwood,” it said. “Or fallen branches near the cliffs.”

Dex shrugged. “Okay,” they said. “Let’s go find some wood.”

And so, several hours passed as Dex and Mosscap combed the shoreline for things that would burn, wandering back and forth in no particular rush. They both stopped to watch a crab that had been hiding beneath a shard of driftwood, and apologized for the disturbance as it scuttled off with offended haste. Mosscap found a glistening harp snail shell in perfect condition but left it behind rather than take it into its satchel where nothing could make it into a home.

By evening, they’d assembled a huge stockpile of kindling, far more than they would need. The wagon’s pantry was stuffed to the brim with the bounty of Dex’s family’s farm, and they chose the evening’s delicacies with care as Mosscap happily arranged sticks into a combustible cone.

“We have so much more than we need,” Mosscap said as it stacked. “It seems silly, to burn all of this at once.”

Dex nodded as they chopped vegetables into chunks destined for skewering. “So, just make a normal fire,” they said. “We can use the leftovers tomorrow.”

Before this moment, there had been no mention between them of what tomorrow might bring. Dex added nothing further to their comment, and Mosscap merely nodded as though this had always been the plan. An agreement was reached, without any of it being discussed.

Once the fire had caught, Dex brought over the skewers of vegetables and some of the grass-hen sausages their mom had made. They taught Mosscap how to roast these without a grill, and savored both portions as the stars came out.

No turtles made an appearance. Neither Mosscap nor Dex minded in the slightest.

The next day, Dex went for a swim. Mosscap took to the water as well, sitting on the sandy seafloor a good ten feet down so that it might spend some quality time with the stingrays and the crabs. Dex baked in the sun afterward, drifting in and out of consciousness without much preference for one state or the other. They didn’t know where Mosscap went as they

dozed, but it returned by evening to build another fire and roast more sausages and poke at embers until they went black.

The third day, Dex remembered they owned a kite. It was shoved into the depths of one of their many cupboards, obtained on a whim one year and forgotten in a matter of days. They showed Mosschap how to fly it, and together they figured out where the invisible currents flowed above them. The steady wind trickled into a useless breeze by midafternoon, at which point they went tide-pooling instead, marveling at sea slugs and letting anemones hug their respective fingers.

The fourth day, Mosschap repeatedly guffawed at a book it was reading, and Dex asked what was so funny enough times that Mosschap just started over and read the whole thing aloud by Dex's side as they walked or sat or lay in the sand. Satire wasn't usually Dex's thing, but they laughed, too, and enjoyed the story very much by the end.

At the end of the day, Mosschap built another fire. "This is the last of the wood," it said.

Dex paused at this, their knife hovering above a half-chopped carrot. "Oh," they said. "Right."

Neither spoke after that. They set their chairs by the fire and cooked the food as the conversation neither wanted to have dangled over them. Dex ate, and Mosschap sat, and they watched the sun begin to set. There was nothing else to be done.

"Do you wanna go first?" Dex asked.

Mosschap said nothing for a while. "Why did you lie to your father?" it said at last.

Dex shut their eyes and let out every breath they'd taken that day. "I don't see how *that's* what we should talk about right now."

"It's what *I* want to talk about, and you asked."

"I did." In truth, Dex was surprised Mosschap hadn't raised the question sooner. "I ... I didn't want him—or any of them—to worry about me."

"Why would they worry?" Mosschap said. "They can see you're safe now, so why worry about something that has already passed?"

"They would worry if I told them why I was out there." Dex shifted uncomfortably. "Some things are private," they said.

"Yes, but..." Mosschap's head whirred. "You tell *me* things that trouble you, and I've only known you a few months. You're of a social species, and

this is your family group. I understand such dynamics can be complicated, but there doesn't seem to be any animosity between you and them. They talk about their problems with you; why don't you do the same?"

"I just..." Dex sighed. "They worry enough—about me traveling alone, about everything that goes on at home. You saw how it is there; there's always *something* going on. If I'm an element of their lives that they can just feel good about, without any complicated bullshit attached, I'd like to keep it that way."

"But then what are they to you?" Mosschap said. "That doesn't strike me as reciprocal." The robot shook its head. "I'm not saying you have to confide in *these people*, specifically, but I haven't seen anyone that you *do* open up to, other than me."

"I'm open when I make tea," Dex said. "If people talk to me about their stuff, I might share some of my stuff. That way they know we're not so different."

"That's not the same at all. That's still under the guise of you providing something for them."

"Yes, but I get something out of it too. Tea service is really intimate. It wouldn't be the same if I was just mixing up blends at home and mailing them off. Seeing people, talking with them, feeling that give-and-take—that's important to me. It really is."

"Yet you don't want to do tea service anymore," Mosschap said.

"I didn't say that."

"Everything about the way you've conducted yourself in our travels says that. You don't want to do it, but you feel like you should. Am I wrong?"

Dex rubbed the bridge of their nose. "No," they said.

"When was the last time you really *enjoyed* tea service, Sibling Dex?"

The sun had sunk to a bare sliver above the horizon, and Dex stared at it as closely as they dared. "When you made it for me," they said quietly. "At the hermitage. It made me feel ... like I wanted to make other people feel. It felt like the reason I wanted to do this in the first place." They clasped their hands together between their knees and focused on them. "Do you remember what you said when we were there, about how nothing needs a purpose? How all living things are allowed to just *exist*, and we don't have to do more than that?"

Mosschap nodded. "I do, yes."

Dex pressed their lips together. “That’s the heart of my faith, Mosschap. That is what I am saying to everyone who comes to my table. I say it out loud, all the fucking time. You don’t have to have a reason to be tired. You don’t have to *earn* rest or comfort. You’re allowed to just *be*. I say that wherever I go.” They threw a hand toward their wagon, its wooden sides emblazoned with the summer bear. “It’s painted on the side of my home! But I don’t feel like it’s true, for me. I feel like it’s true for everyone else but *not me*. I feel like I have to do more than that. Like I have a *responsibility* to do more than that.”

“Why?” Mosschap said.

“Because I’m good at something,” Dex said. “I’m good at something that helps other people. I worked really hard to be able to do it, and I benefited from the labor and love of others while I did so. I’m able to do what I do because everybody else built a world in which I could do it. If I just say ‘Thanks for all of that, but I’m running off to the woods now,’ how is that fair? That doesn’t sit right with me, not at all. I’d just be a leech if I did that.”

Mosschap looked confused. “What’s wrong with being a leech?”

“You know what I mean,” said Dex.

“I don’t,” said Mosschap.

Dex sighed. “A leech is a person who takes without giving back. It’s a metaphor.”

Mosschap considered that. “I don’t think it’s very kind to use an entire subclass of animal as a metaphor for behavior that you deem unseemly.”

Dex threw up their hands. “Well, we do it, all the time.”

“And it’s not even an *accurate* metaphor,” Mosschap went on. “You’re basing that shorthand off of the human relationship to leeches, not the entire experience of being a leech. They’re as vital a part of their ecosystem as anything else.”

“Gods around.” Dex rubbed their face with their palms.

“Would you use the term *parasite* in the same metaphorical manner?”

“Yes!” Dex exclaimed. “I would!”

Mosschap gave Dex a reproachful look. “All parasites have value, Sibling Dex. Not to their hosts, perhaps, but you could say the same about a predator and a prey animal. They all *give back*—not to the individual but to

the ecosystem at large. Wasps are tremendously important pollinators. Birds and fish eat bloodsucks.”

“This is making my head hurt,” Dex said. “And also, none of this has anything to do with what I’m saying. I’m talking about the relationship between *me* and *other people*, not a fish and a bloodsuck.”

“It’s your metaphor,” Mosschap said.

“Well, I’m never going to use it again.” Dex picked up a stick and poked at the fire irritably.

Mosschap let the matter go, and it picked up a stick too. “You’re not alone in this, you know,” it said, nudging bark off of glowing wood. “‘Purpose’ is one of the most common answers I get to my question.” It lowered its gaze and sighed. “I’m beginning to worry that you were right, you know.”

“About what?”

“About my question. You said when we first met that you thought it was impossible to answer.”

“I still do,” Dex said.

Mosschap looked seriously at them. “Then why do you come with me?”

“I’m not with you for the *question*,” Dex scoffed.

The robot took that in as it played with the fire. “When I first volunteered to make contact, we all thought this was a very good question. We wanted to know if you’d done all right in the time since robots left your society. We knew you’d *improved*, certainly. You were on the brink of collapse when we left, and obviously that hadn’t happened. Your villages have a glow at night—we can see them, if we’re in the Borderlands. And the satellites, of course. Those wouldn’t stay up without your help. We knew you were still *here*. We knew things were better. I never saw it for myself, but I know the previous generations watched the rivers clear up. They saw the trees grow back. My kind witnessed the world heal itself, but we didn’t know how well *you* had healed. Nobody was sure what I’d find out here, least of all me. So, you see, it was a very sensible introductory question. What is it that you need?”

“You thought it might be something basic,” Dex said. “Like ... we need food. Or living space. Better technology. Something like that.”

“Possibly, yes. But I’ve been nowhere with you where those needs aren’t provided for. And when people interpret my question beyond the things you require to stay alive and healthy, it gets...”

“Complicated?”

Mosscap nodded, looking exhausted. “Every answer I’ve received falls into one of two categories. Every single one.” The robot gestured emphatically with its metal fingers. “The first category is extremely specific things. ‘I need my bicycle fixed so I can deliver these goods to another village.’ ‘We need to prepare better for the next time the river floods.’ ‘I need to find my dog.’ Things like that. Either a very personal, individual need or a broader need within the community, but all in all, specific and isolated.”

“Okay. And the second category?”

“The second category is esoteric. Philosophical. I get answers such as ‘purpose,’ or ‘adventure,’ or ‘companionship.’ A broad requirement the person has in regards to feeling satisfaction with their life. Some people lack whatever it is and are searching for it, but others already *have* it. They interpret the question as me asking what aspects of their lives they would not want to do without, not as an *unmet* need. And I hadn’t considered this, at the start. Must a need be *unmet* if it is to satisfy my question?”

Dex exhaled and shook their head. “You tell me, Mosscap,” they said. “I have no fucking idea.”

“Neither do I, and that’s just it. I thought this was the most bothersome thing on my mind until I spoke with your father the other night and he asked me what *I* need.” Mosscap dropped the stick and turned to face them. “Sibling Dex, *I don’t know*. I don’t know at *all*. So, what am I supposed to do now? How am I to ask my question of others when I can’t answer it for myself?”

Dex listened to this complaint, and as they processed it, a slow, wry, not-at-all-funny smile spread across their face. “How am I supposed to tell people they’re good enough as they are when I don’t think I am?” they said.

Mosscap responded with a single heavy nod. “You see,” it said. “You understand. I wish you didn’t, because I know it means you’re as tangled up as I am, but ... I’m grateful that you do.”

“Is that why you didn’t want to go to the City?” Dex asked. “Because you’re not sure about your question?”

“No,” the robot said after a moment.

“Is it because there’s too much going on there?” Dex asked. “We can cancel stuff, no problem. I’d love to, honestly—”

“No, that’s not it,” Mosschap said. “I didn’t—I *don’t* want to go to the City. I don’t want to go to the City, because the City is the end.”

Mosschap didn’t need to explain what it meant; Dex understood. The end of their travels. The end of their companionship, maybe. They hadn’t discussed what they wanted to do after the City, but therein lay the problem. It was a question mark, an empty space. It wasn’t the only thing that had made Dex about-face on the road, but it was the one they hadn’t known how to voice. Not until now.

“We don’t have to split up,” Dex said softly. “We don’t have to go anywhere we don’t want to go, do anything we don’t want to do.” Their brow furrowed. “You are the weirdest, most inexplicable thing that’s ever happened to me. You make me crazy, most days. You say so much shit I don’t understand.” Their voice cracked, and grew almost inaudibly quiet. “But whatever it is we’re doing, it’s the first thing in a long time I’ve been sure about.” They swallowed. “Most days, you’re the only thing that makes sense.”

Mosschap did nothing but nod several times, in fervent agreement. “So, what do we do?” it said. “Do we go to the City? Do we go back to the wilds? Do we...” It waved its hands empty.

“I don’t know.” Dex’s fingers found their pendant, and they held the symbol of their god hard. “You know, *I* never answered your question.”

“Yes, you have. I ask you all the time what it is that you need.”

“Yeah, but you ask about everyday stuff. I never answered it the first time you asked. Remember?” Dex would never forget. “You walked out of the woods, and you said, ‘What do you need, and how can I help?’”

Mosschap smiled at this. “I remember, yes.”

“Well, I didn’t know then,” Dex said, “and I still don’t. But what I do know is ... you help. You’re helping me figure it out. Just by being here. You help.”

“Then we have the same answer,” Mosschap said. “I don’t know, either. But you are my best help, Sibling Dex.” It looked at the fire built of the last of the driftwood, dying more quickly than the ones that had come before. “What if that is enough, for now? What if we’re both trying to answer something much too big before we’ve answered the small thing we should have started with? What if it’s enough to just be...”

Us, Dex knew Mossicap meant, though the robot didn't finish. "Then we tackle the rest when we're ready," they said. "However long that takes."

Mossicap started to say more, but its attention was captured by something else. "Look!" it cried, pointing toward the sea.

Dex looked. The last of the day's light had faded, rendering the water an inky void. There was no dividing line between ocean and sky any longer, no horizon separating here from there. Motan's stripes still hung in their comforting curve, and stars were waking by the handful, but at first, all Dex saw below these cosmic constants was emptiness.

Their eyes adjusted, and as they did, color and shape appeared. A gentle wave broke, and would have been invisible, were it not for the blue glow that blossomed in the crest, a vibrant splash winking in and out, quick as breath.

Dex and Mossicap each leaned forward, eyes fixed on the shore. Another wave came, right on cue, and with it, another burst of blue.

"I've heard of this," Mossicap said in a hush, "but I've never seen it for myself."

"Same," Dex said. They stood up. "Come on."

The two hurried down to the water. The sand beneath Dex's bare feet became wetter with every step, squishing up around their soles. The edge of a wave ran over their toes, caressing them with a liquid hello. Dex looked down and saw a blue swirl outlining their feet like ink in the process of being spilled.

"It's bacteria, right?" Dex said. "Or plankton, or something?"

"Phytoplankton, yes," Mossicap said. "Tiny little not-quite-plants." The robot bent itself in half, bringing its face close to the water. "And aren't they beautiful." It reached out its hand, making contact with things too small to be seen alone.

Dex crouched down and did as Mossicap was doing, tracing their fingers on the surface and summoning light in their wake. As they did so, a more spirited wave snuck in and splashed its way up Dex's trousers. "Agh," Dex said, taking a few hurried steps in retreat.

Mossicap looked over. Its eyes glowed in the dark, a different shade of blue. "Should we go back?" it asked.

"Not a chance," Dex said. They did what they should've done at the start and stripped their clothes off, piece by piece. They left their garments in a

heap on the sand a safe distance from the water, then turned and ran full tilt into the waves, whooping like a little kid. They gasped as the water crashed into their naked body, cool and enveloping, spraying salt in their mouth and filling the world with light.

Mosscap ran after them, laughing in harmony. There was nothing more that could be said in words. There was only shouting, cheering, cries of delight as the two of them jumped and played and marveled at the spectacle that would've existed whether anyone was there to witness it or not.

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ALSO BY **BECKY CHAMBERS**

To Be Taught, if Fortunate

MONK & ROBOT

A Psalm for the Wild-Built

WAYFARERS

The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet

A Closed and Common Orbit

Record of a Spaceborn Few

The Galaxy, and the Ground Within

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Julie Branson

BECKY CHAMBERS is a science fiction author based in Northern California. She is best known for her Hugo Award–winning Wayfarers series. Her books have also been nominated for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, the Locus Award, and the Women’s Prize for Fiction, among others.

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A PRAYER FOR THE CROWN-SHY

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