

I
want a
mechanical
echidna

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a wombwell book

Leaves falling off an overfull wheelbarrow.

The wheelbarrow was red and there was a man shovelling, piling it higher with even more leaves, and sticks. He was dressed in a white feathered cloak, and his shovelling elbows made it flap. Sea-eagle feathers I guessed, and beneath it was a knee length grey smock stained with earth. He was also wearing some sort of hook-beaked mask and ducked his head this way and that in order to see what he was doing through the eye slits. Then he suddenly stopped and stood next to, but did not push, as I expected, the rusty wheelbarrow away. He held the broad shovel in both of his hands, resting the handle across his smock covered thighs.

"Goodness."

One of us said that, not both.

He put the head of the shovel down, and dipping his beak to one side. I could see his beady eye through the mask. He said, "Welcome, O stranger, to our land."

I stumbled forth out of my little nook in the burl of a great urngum. "Thank you, kind worker of the earth," I replied, "it is good to be made welcome."

He bowed his head, which is basically a slow nod, so I nodded too.

"What is your want?" he asked.

"What?" Now I wasn't really awake yet. If I was more alert to the world I would have wanted something else, no doubt about that. As it was I had just stepped out of a tree.

"Yes, what is your want?" He smiled under his beak through a thick beard.

"My what?" I blinked in the bright sunlight. How long had I been asleep in the full sun?

"Your want, what is your want?"

I noticed that the wooden shovel was covered in the black and white shit of birds or reptiles. I took a deep breath, best not to be rude.

"I want to find," though that word sure sounded rude to my foreign ears, "a mechanical echidna."

Now it was his turn.

"What?"

I found that my mouth had woken up before I did, and now I was listening to myself, thinking, what am I talking about! Of course, my mouth just kept going on and on.

"You know."

"No. I do not." He lay the shovel on the full wheelbarrow, and moved to pick up the handles and roll away.

"...you know, I, umm, want a clockwork anteater."

He stopped, shook his head some, and turned back. "What does it look like?"

"Well, well, it has a beak."

"Like me?"

"No, a real beak and a long..."

"My beak is real."

I squinted. Best not to be rude, I thought, so I just nodded in understanding.

"Ahh, I know," he asked, "does it have a duck's bill and a beaver's tail?"

"No, no, close, close though, except, well, now it does lay eggs, just like a duckbill platypus, or would if it weren't mechanical, but you see, it does not swim. Much."

"Because it is clockwork, yes, obviously."

"Nn-yes, look, it wouldn't swim anyway."

"Oh, why not?"

"Because it eats ants, and ants don't swim."

"Ah, I see."

I nodded deeply, we both saw. We were beginning to get somewhere.

He nodded and behind his beak I saw him smile again.

"Now," I continued, feeling more myself, "the clockwork anteater catches ants by way of a long sticky tongue, sticky because of tiny hooks or burrs, and on which ant legs and antennae get caught, and which is why it has such a long beak I guess. This long tongue is pushed way down into termite nests, or ant's nests, that the clockwork echidna has ripped open with its strong fore claws, in search of nest mind data, and fat juicy queens. Mechanical echidnas are monotremoid informavores, but, unlike bit parasites, they survive the periodic electromagnetic pulse sterilisations our great master artists use in order to cleanse the wombwell of amberlife, because they are clockwork animata chiseled out of urngum wood. And smart too, very smart, from all that data they eat, though they can be real bores when they sort of vomit it back out." I finished with a quick knowing nod.

His smile widened, and his bright eyes looked heavenward, but then he lost the small joy in a quick worry. "But so, is this really your want, or have you just lost one of these mechanical echidnas? Tell me what your want really is."

"No, no, I really want a clockwork anteater," I said politely, and for the third time.

He bowed his head. I smiled. Everything was fine. I went forward a few steps in order to get a good look at what had left those marks on the

shovel. The sun was too bright in my eyes as I looked up. It sort of smelt right, but a bit too much like my odious sister. But the trouble was I felt like I was coming down with a cold, and so my sense of smell was not what it should be and I wasn't sure. My nose seemed blocked, even though I could speak with no effort at all. I shook my head.

"...and let me tell you what else it can do."

"No, no, let me guess the rest," he broke in. "Born covered in long spines, which helped it break free of its sclerid egg, it goes schnuffle-schnuffle-tick, schnuffle-schnuffle-tock, schnuffle-schnuffle-tick as it walks along."

"What?"

"I have found your want."

"What?"

"And it is you?"

"I what?"

"Maybe you are looking for this too?" From the back of the wheelbarrow he pulled out a wooden key, and it did look like a good fit.

"Where did you get that back up power supply?"

"Well, I just stumbled across it in a moment of grace."

We both smiled. His eye glinted through the mask.

"What?" I hear you, dear reader, say, "how could you know that? You just found out you were the mechanical anteater you were wanting, so how could you know this sudden key was a good fit?"

Well you know, you just know when you shuffle out into a sunny day, and meet a man, who thinks he is a white mallee eagle, out burying his clutch in a big mound of rotting leaf litter, you just know his key will fit, and that he will be able to wind you up.

Of course I am a mechanical echidna, a clockwork anteater. It makes selfshaping sense, I mean, what did you think I was? What else could one want? What would you be wanting? More, less, or else?

Though, I guess, if I had wanted to know where I was instead, then I might be able to make it home again. Or, if only I had wanted a name, then I might become famous. And if I had wanted...

"But you cannot have everything, as much as you might want it, because everything is nothing at all, and if you are to be something, let alone be someone, you have to want just a little bit, only then can you call it your own, and it only then becomes something you are wont to do, even as it becomes you."

I shook my head. I wonder where I ate that!

The mallee eagle said, "You'll never be human you know."

"You'll never fly either."

