

The Springtime Paradox

The paradox lay in spring and in his very existence. Felix was experiencing what could only be described as a midlife crisis—except, that right there was the crux of the issue. He didn't *have* a midlife.

He did have many other things, and truth be told, they were far more enviable. His quantum alloy frame granted him the strength to heft heavy sacks of flour and large batches of dough. His precision-engineered servos allowed him to knead with consistent pressure, ensuring perfect texture every time (despite the notoriously tricky baking process, his Supernova Citrus Brioche received only glowing reviews). His memory banks stored thousands of recipes, from simple loaves to intricate pastries.

His circuits would never corrode, his memory would never degrade. The subroutines that governed his daily tasks executed with the meticulous precision they had since his activation. Yet, beneath this seamless functionality, an unsettling sense of inertia had taken root in him.

And, as if to mock his lack of it, life was blooming rebelliously around him. During his morning vapoursweep, he'd discovered chickweed in the windowsill, peering lace-white faces up at him. He'd yanked them out viciously. Vapourised them for good measure. It wouldn't make for the establishment to look disorderly and unhygienic; weeds jeopardised business.

Felix shoved a dirty tray into the dishsteamer and held it for precisely three seconds. Radioants, too, were an issue. Three years ago, a colony had settled in the storage room. Even after the installation of the ionising ozone diffusers, which saturated the air with a subtle, acrid tang, the ants displayed stubborn tenacity. New hatchlings marched up and down, boasting robust exoskeletons sheened with a reflective, gas-repelling gloss. A few were even declaring independence and migrating to the warm crevices behind the radiators. Last year, Felix would've charted their mutations with his nanoscope and a steady servo. This year, he might ask Manager Song to call pest control.

He shook the crumbs out of another tray and strode towards the side door, bowl in hand. The wooden threshold felt like a portal, through which the radioants and the chickweed had infiltrated. Beyond it, he could detect spring's kinetic energy erupting from its winter seams like a geyser. He expelled pollen from his olfactory vents with a rapid sequence of clicks and whirrs. It sounded like: "Fwoo-crrk-skk."

"Bless you!" Chef Ming called out from the kitchen.

What a wholly human thing to say. Felix's irritation deepened. "Thank you, Chef," he replied.

Stepping outside, the full force of spring was an electric surge through his system. The pond was murmuring gently—a heartbeat to the newly sprouted grass. The sky above spread out like an expanse of cerulean plasma, casting a serene backdrop to chirping birds and industrious bees. A blimp drifted overhead and pursued lazy clouds.

Lila, beady-eyed and ever-curious, honed in on him immediately. He set the bowl down and began scattering the crumbs. Her children fluttered over, their tiny beaks drumming against the ground like rapid key-clicks. The sight of magpie chicks ordinarily cheered Felix up like nothing else. But today, their presence sat heavily in his circuits like expired engine oil.

Lila fluttered her wings and settled on his shoulder.

"What's got your wires in a twist?" she rasped, studying him inquisitively.

"Well. Just the usual. Preparing bread. Baking bread. Serving bread. Not *eating* bread. How's motherhood treating you?"

"Felix, if I had a seed for every time we had this talk..."

He gave her a sullen whirr, but when he looked up, her gaze was patient. She had the bearings of someone who had seen the world change through many seasons, and a gentle hum reverberated through

his neural pathways. He'd known her since she was a haughty fledgling, and this, more than anything, let him confide in her. He told her about the chickweed, and the radioants, and the restless energy that seemed to pulse through the very air around him.

"You grow, and you live, and you change," he droned, voice growing louder and louder. "You live a life cycle! I'm purposeless, I'm inorganic—"

"You're one annoying fucker," Lila said. "Robot consciousness was a mistake."

Felix opted for dignified silence. His momentum crashed like a wave against a rocky shore. He watched a particularly bold chick tug at a loose screw on his leg. "Shiny, Mama!" it chirped.

Lila warbled at it, the syllables too fast for Felix's language processing unit to keep up. He unhinged his knee and gave it a shake to pop a loose screw off. The chick snatched it up, lightning quick, and hopped away.

"You'll spoil them," Lila huffed.

"Sorry."

"Listen, tin can," Lila said. "You think having a bunch of screaming mouths to feed is purpose? Look at my brats," she wagged a claw at the hatchlings, who were now pecking at something shiny on the ground. "Lookg at them down there, biting a button. Do they look like they're fulfilling a sacred prophecy to you?"

Felix looked. "I don't know."

"And next season, some of them will probably leave the garden and never look back. And maybe they'll have chicks. And maybe they won't."

"But I don't have that choice at all! I don't have *any* purpose, not like you do."

“Is purpose inherited?” Lila asked, shifting her weight on his shoulder.

They lapsed into silence again. Together, they studied the sky. The clouds formed shifting, unhurried matrices of light and shadow, beckoning him to drift along. That one over there looked like a giant croissant.

When his morning break came to an end, Felix bade Lila a goodbye. She didn’t hear him, too absorbed in squawking at her chicks. One of them, the bold one with the screw, was tittering at the others, showing off the trophy. It started spearheading a grand quest to rescue a great many precious metals from the local decommissioning facility.

Back inside, the aroma of freshly baked bread enveloped him like sunlight. Chef Ming was grinning as he chatted to a customer. Felix walked past them, flashing a cheerful LED pattern at a baby in a pram.

He paused, adjusted his optics. There, in his peripheral vision, by the windowsill. No doubt about it, a yellow bud was emerging from the crack, its back turned reproachfully away. It was a defiant life, demanding its right to grow despite meagre light and space. He would need to water it.