

The Bird Machine

Oswin Prie is in love with a genius.

Vo Tien has a beautiful mind, a shining spirit, and, best yet, an incredible way with tools. Oz is in love with their best friend, and their best friend is a tinkerer. And for the past year, their best friend has been working on a flying machine.

Now, they've pestered her over and over about the specifics of the machine, to little avail.

"Come on," they whine, "just one little hint!"

She laughs, elbowing them away from where they've been prodding at a propeller. "No way," she says. "You already know way too much about it!"

"Whaaaaaat?" They're on top of the machine now, having scrambled up like a monkey to avoid the jab coming their way. "But I barely know anything!"

A wrench comes flying at them, and they duck with practiced ease. Tien huffs, crossing her arms. "You know two whole things about it, and it was already supposed to be a surprise. Now get off the machine and make yourself useful. I need someone to bring me back my wrench, and I don't see Bao here to order around, so I guess you're the next best thing."

Oz laughs and hops off their perch as Tien swipes at her brow and gets back to work.

Okay, so maybe what they do know is pretty important. Sue them, they're nosy.

"Ha!" they crow, swerving their bike around the corner to screech to a stop at the front of the dusty driveway that leads to Tien's house. "I heard a rumour."

"Oh Gods," Tien mutters, grinning as she jogs towards them. "What's it this time?"

Oz grins, a cat with the cream. "A little songbird told me that your machine is gonna fly in the sky when it's finished."

Tien gapes. "Oh my- did you bribe my brother again?"

“In his defense,” Oz winks, “I can be very persuasive.”

Tien blushes, but Oz keeps talking. “Also, apparently it’s named after a bird.” They bat their eyes, looking up at her. “Wanna say which one?”

Her blush intensifies, and she tucks her hair behind her ears. “Well,” she says, “if you insist...” Oz’s breath catches as she steps closer to them.

“It’s called... the Birdbrain Machine. I named it after you.”

“Hey- wait- hey! No, get back here! Tell me the real name!”

“Not a chance!”

They haven’t managed to badger anything else out of her. She’s tricky, that Vo Tien. Also, she’s bullied Bao into not taking Oz’s bribes anymore, so there goes their best source of inside information. Anyways, all this to say that they’ve taken to calling the little metal guy by a different avian nickname every time they visit her in her shop.

“Morning, Crow!”

“Hey there, Kiwi.”

“Afternoon, Owlet.”

Tien’s never confirmed or denied any of their guesses, but somehow, Oz has the sneaking suspicion they haven’t gotten it right yet.

And then, on a trip into town one day, Oz sees a flyer.

“Have you seen this?”

Tien jumps, banging her head on the underside of the bird machine and yelping. She wheels herself out from underneath the propeller, covered in engine oil and sweat. “You almost gave me a heart attack!” she scolds, pushing herself off the ground to embrace them. “You know

what happened last time I got startled while working! Bao still has those burn scars!” She pauses, then furrows her eyebrows. “And why are your groceries all over the floor?”

Oz waves a dismissive arm – the same arm, in fact, that had carelessly dropped said groceries as they’d slid into the garage not a moment before. “Eh, they’re unbroken. And let’s be honest, Bao was asking for it, being that close to the vat.”

Tien snorts her agreement, and idly begins flipping her screwdriver. “Seriously, though, what’s with the excitement?”

Oz beams. “Thought you’d never ask.” They hold up the flyer they’d unabashedly stolen from the town announcement board and wave it in her face. She squints.

“A... competition?”

“Better than that, an invention competition! Over in Wensleydale, they’re judging people’s inventions from all over. First place gets a grant for their next big project!”

Tien bites her lip. “You really think I could win?”

Oz looks at the bird machine. At the flyer. At her.

“I know you can.”

The week before the competition, Tien gets a message. She doesn’t tell Oz what it’s about, but they see her face fall. They reach an arm out to comfort her, but she turns away.

Oz doesn’t see her at all the next little while. Five days before the competition, they corner Bao.

“She’s left for a bit.”

“What do you mean, she’s left for a bit?”

“I mean, Mom’s fallen sick, and Tien had to go take care of her. Honestly, I thought you’d have been the first to know.”

“But the competition-”

"It's too late. She's already there. There's no way she'd make it to Wensleydale on time, much less after having to double back here for the machine."

"...Oh."

"Yeah."

A minute passes, and then Oz nods to herself.

"Hey Bao?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you send your sister a message?"

"I mean sure, but what?"

"Tell her she's still gonna be in that competition, because I'm gonna present her machine for her."

Bao furrows his brow. "There's no way you're gonna make it there in time, even by carriage," he concludes eventually.

"Well then," says Oz. "I suppose I'll have to fly."

Bao beams.

Oz has five days to learn how to fly the machine to the city.

It's gruelling work. They crash and burn more times than they can count. They're lucky it's only a day of flight travel to get to the contest.

It's still exhausting. Each dawn for five days, they wake up and go to their friend's garage, where the bird machine resides. "Morning, Dove", they greet it each dawn. "Morning, Sparrow; morning, Seagull; morning, Crane. We have a lot of ground to cover."

So they work. And they work. And inch by inch, step by painful, frustrating step, they *fly*.

And they soar. Up, up, into the great beyond, up into the blue and the white and the everything in between. They and the bird machine pass through clouds, streak through the sky, glide amongst migrating ravens.

They touch down just as the judges arrive at their panel.

“We did it, Bluebird,” Oz crows to the machine later that evening in the inn room they rented. “We did it!”

A week passes.

The scores are tallied. The competitors show up at the judging, each nervous in their own right. Oz runs their hand along the bird machine, murmuring to it softly.

Scores are announced. Tenth place. Ninth place. Seventh. Fifth. A particularly eye-catching green gizmo takes fourth, and Oz swallows the lump in their throat.

Third place is announced. The crowd cheers. It's a beautiful contraption, designed to help improve the way the city pumps water.

Second place. The crowd roars. A wonderful design, meant to broadcast one's voice across far stretches of land. Then, the moment they've all been waiting for.

The announcer opens the crimson envelope, sealed with gold. He scans the name of the entry. The crowd awaits, thrumming with the energy of a thousand eager spectators.

“And, in first place,” the announcer says, “we have— oh! It, uh, it says here that the creator didn't enter a name for their invention before the allotted date, but in first place: the astounding flying machine!”

The crowd *explodes*.

Oz is cheering, screaming, tears streaming down their face as they shakily move to the podium. Someone yells at them to make a speech, then another, and soon enough the entire crowd is chanting for them. The announcer offers his megaphone, smiling, and Oz takes it.

They address the crowd.

“Now, uh, before- before about two weeks ago, I actually, uh, had no idea what this thing did,” they say, shuffling their feet as they laugh self consciously. “Uh, I’m presenting this invention,” they say, “on behalf of the, uh, the actual creator, my wonderful friend, who unfortunately couldn’t make the contest. She- she actually thought she’d have to drop out, but, uh, I couldn’t have that, so I- I taught myself how to fly this thing, I guess, and I flew it here.”

“You know,” they continue, “it’s funny, considering how well I know it now, but three weeks ago, I’d only be able to tell you two things about the flying machine.” They grin, a lopsided thing, but no less charming for it. The crowd is murmuring, though they can’t quite tell why. “I, uh, I only really knew that it’d be able to fly, and that it was meant to be named after a bird.” They chuckle. “Not even sure which bird, actually. I’ve been cycling through bird names like mad, trying to figure it out, but nothing so far has seemed to-“

Oz freezes.

Oz freezes, because the crowd has just parted, a panting girl has just appeared at the foot of the podium, and their best friend in the entire world has just yelled, “WAIT!”

Oz drops the megaphone with a clatter, running down the steps of the podium to greet Tien. They embrace her, cupping her face in their hands.

“I didn’t think you were going to make it!” they exclaim, beaming. She laughs, like wind through a propellor. “I didn’t either! My mother was better by the end of that first week, so I set out for town as soon as your message came and just hoped I would make it in time!”

“Well, hey, then,” Oz says, taking her by the hand and gently dragging her up the podium steps, “this is your invention. You should be making the winning speech.”

They take the megaphone back from the unimpressed announcer and shove it in her hands. She looks at it, looks at them, and then looks out to the crowd.

“Hi, everybody,” she says. “My name is Vo Tien, and, well, this is my machine.”

“I built it, uh, actually, for a very special reason,” she continues. “See, uh, I have this friend, who I- I like a lot. and they... they’re *incredible*, you guys. They’re wonderful. I’m so, so lucky to know them. But sometimes- sometimes they forget how amazing they are. So I made them a gift.”

“Oswin Prie has always loved the sky,” she says. “So I figured, if I can’t give them the sky itself, why not give the next best thing?” She turns to Oz, arms outstretched, gesturing to her

phenomenal, brilliant, *genius* flying machine. “So, Oz Prie,” she says, “I’d like for you to meet Osprey. Your flying machine.”

And Oz shakes their head and laughs through the tears, and says, “No. I think- I think I want to meet *our* flying machine.”

And they kiss her.