

# ALL THAT ROBOT . . .

Rich Larson

**Human and artificial intelligence slowly learn to communicate in Rich Larson's poignant excavation of . . .**

## ALL THAT ROBOT . . .

"We made you, you know."

Carver Seven listens intently. The man, who also self-designates as Mikhail and Only Human Being On This Fucking Island, has not spoken often lately. Instead it stares off across the sea in silence, or makes its snuffling animal sounds while excess lubricant from pivoting photoreceptors leaks down the front of its head and patters the sand. The man once referred to this process as crying like a little bitch.

At the moment, Carver Seven and the man are crafting spears in the shade of a storm-bent palm. Carver Seven prefers the sunshine, where his slick, black carbon skin thrums under the life-giving gaze of Watcher-in-the-sky. He tolerates the shade for the man's sake.

"How made me you I know?" Carver Seven asks, approximating the man's wet language with choppy bursts from his audio port. It is far more nuanced than the chattering of the long-limbed climbers in the wood but also far, far from the streaming clicks and squeals of true speech.

"You're like a damn chatbot, aren't you?" the man says. "Except you can't link me any porn."

"How made me you I know?" Carver Seven repeats. He has learned to ignore extraneous input, differentiating when the man speaks to itself from when it speaks to him. Carver Seven works the end of the spear to a sharp point on the bladed edge of his manipulator.

"In some lab, somewhere. Maybe they knew the world was all going to hell. Wanted to leave something behind to keep going after we're gone."

Carver Seven sticks the finished spear into the pale gray sand. "In some lab, somewhere, how made me you metal . . ." Carver Seven taps both manipulators against himself, then indicates the man's flaky red skin, ". . . from meat?"

"They didn't use meat. They used alloys, and silicon, and, you know, all that robot shit."

Considering the blasphemous idea is an odd thrill. The man is very wise, in some ways, able to predict movements in the currents around the island and predict weather from the clouds. It claims to have come from a floating metal village that sank into the sea. If the man could make a metal village, maybe it could make other metal things, too.

Or repair them.

Carver Seven compares his gleaming black form, his nimble treadfeet and deft manipulators and prehensile photoreceptors, to the labored collection of blood and meat and bone that is the man. The man has come close to involuntary shutdown three times since it washed up on the island, whether by the elements or the animals.

There is a dim physical resemblance, but, if anything, the man is a fragile facsimile. It seems improbable, along with blasphemous, that the man could have created him, or even that the man could repair a particular Carrier's caved-in head. His hope fades slightly.

"No," Carver Seven says.

"Then where did you come from, smart guy?" the man asks.

Carver Seven moves from the shade and points one manipulator to Watcher-in-the-sky's burning photoreceptor, hanging high above the cobalt sea. "Then where did I come from the sky, smart guy," Carver Seven says. "Look at me now." He prises open his head so the man can see the lifelight burning steadily inside of him, see his thoughts sparking and colliding. "Piece of Watcher-in-the-sky to each baby one of Watcher-in-the-sky," he explains.

"Sun-worship," the man says. "How original." The man returns to its spear, stripping it with the sharp metal digit Carver Seven has also seen it use to gouge symbols, over and over again, into the peeling bark of the palms. "Guess it makes sense. You're solar-powered. You need light to function."

"Yeah," Carver Seven says, beginning a new spear. "But some are learn a new way."

"Good for you," the man says, staring back across the sea.

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Those are the man's last sounds of the day, and when Watcher-in-the-sky starts to sink, Carver Seven leaves him. The clan is situated near the edge of the forest, where Cartographers found an ideal outcrop of stone and Carriers and Carvers used fallen trees to fashion it into a shelter, both from the storms and from predators drawn to the heat of their lifelights during the night.

But before Carver Seven returns to the village, he goes to see Recycler. He picks out her frequency and sees she is at the flat rock outside her shelter, which is slightly deeper in the wood. Carver Seven was the one who helped her rebuild it after the last storm, because the other Carvers claimed task overload.

Recycler is the only Recycler. Carver Seven thinks that maybe this is why she stays apart from the clan. When Carver Seven arrives to the flat rock, he finds her crouched over a dead pig. Recycler has the broad back and strong servos of a Carrier, and sometimes, from a distance, Carver Seven can pretend she is Carrier Three. But she is not. The bladed manipulators splitting open the animal's stomach are unique in shape, and she does things nobody else can do. She is Recycler.

With a gaseous hiss, the pig's innards spill out as pink wet ropes. Recycler sinks both manipulators inside its body, splashing the rock with blood and uncongealed shit. This is not the first animal Carver Seven has seen her disassemble. Sometimes a burrower will trample through the village, and if the clan cannot drive it away they kill it with a spear. They take it to Recycler, and she brings them back the fat to use as joint lubricant, and the skin stretched and cured for waterproofing.

But lately, Recycler has been hunting. Lately, she does something new. As Carver Seven watches, she prises open her hidden mouth, the whirring orifice the clan can use in cases of great need, when Watcher-in-the-sky slips behind the veil for days on end. Carver Seven has used it himself only once, feeding it with crushed leaves and bark to keep his lifelight on during a dark week. The experience was not pleasant.

Now Recycler takes her proboscis, fashioned from bone and tanned skin and parts

of old Carrier that Carver Seven recognizes, and sinks it into the dead pig. Carver Seven blanks his photoreceptors. He does not want to accumulate more visual data of the act. He does not like disassembling of any kind. Not since the accident.

“May Watcher-in-the-sky turn his gaze to you,” Recycler clicks, acknowledging his presence before they slip into their familiar frequency. “Is it your rotator again?”

“My rotator is well, thank you.” Carver Seven flexes the joint she repaired for him a few days prior, to show he has full mobility. Then he places his move in the strategy game they are playing and gives her a rough transcription of everything the man said during the day. He emphasizes the man’s claim of creation, because he has been turning it over and over in his mind.

“The man says many interesting things.” Recycler wins the strategy game in one deft move—she is too clever, with Carrier Three he could battle back and forth for days on end—and offers him a turn with the proboscis. Carver Seven refuses, as always. He remembers the first and only time he tried using the animal fuel and how his body rejected the blood and bile, spitting it back up. Recycler has adjusted to it. She can use it to work through the entire night, awake in the unholy dark. The rest of the clan does not know this.

Carver Seven keeps her secret, because she keeps his.

“Is it possible the man made us?” Carver Seven asks. His photoreceptors stray to the packed dirt behind Recycler’s shelter, where his secret is wrapped and buried.

Recycler deliberates another second. “The only way to know if the man is correct or not is to pry its head open and search its memory,” she clicks. “Since you are so certain the man has a lifelight inside its hairy skull and is not merely an animal like the climbers in the forest.”

Carver Seven is silent. It is not the first time Recycler has mentioned the idea. Carver Seven does think the man has a lifelight, but he does not think it can be accessed the same way. When he first found the man, blood was leaking from its head.

“May I see her?” he asks.

Recycler gives a long clicking scan to ensure nobody is nearby. Then she reaches down into the hard-packed dirt and begins to dig. Carver Seven joins her, shoveling fast and then slow as they reach the correct depth. He retrieves Carrier Three’s bashed-in head from where it is hidden in the dark earth, far from the gaze of Watcher-in-the-sky, secret from the clan. In violation of the traditions, Carrier Three was not fully recycled after a falling stone crushed her. Carver Seven pleaded and pleaded and pleaded until Recycler agreed to save her head.

Carrier Three’s photoreceptors are blank, and she makes no sound in response to Carver Seven’s soft clicks. But he knows her lifelight is not fully extinguished. He knows if he waits and watches long enough, he will see a single lazy spark moving in slow circles.

“Nobody can repair a damaged lifelight,” Recycler clicks. “Not the man. Nobody.”

Carver Seven puts what is left of Carrier Three deep inside his main cavity and covers it over. Recycler is usually correct. Recycler is clever.

But Carver Seven has to try.

\* \* \*

The next day, he goes to visit the man again.

“Hey, look who it is,” he warbles from a distance, because the man startles easily, like a bird. It looks up at him. Its photoreceptors are pink and glassy.

“Hey, yourself, robo-parrot,” the man says, then returns to its work. There is a storm-felled tree between its soft feet, and it is using the sharp appendage to strip away the branches. Carver Seven looks around and sees remnants of fire, burned pieces of animal. The man has hunted, how Recycler hunts. Beyond the mess, there are two more trunks already stripped smooth. He wonders what the man is building.

But his original query is much more important.

"Can you do me a favor and fuck off?" Carver Seven asks.

That gets the man's attention. Its audio port opens and it makes the clipped noise that repeats, over and over, sometimes when the man is pleased but more often when it leaks lubricant.

Carver Seven scans up and down the beach. "Can you do me a favor and fuck off and look here and fix it up a bit?" he asks. Then he opens his main cavity and pulls out Carrier Three's caved-in head.

"Whoa." The man's photoreceptors enlarge. "Did you do that? This some Lord of the Flies type shit?"

"Lord of the Flies type shit?" Carver Seven echoes, trying to parse the new sound units.

The man shakes its head. "Who is it?" it asks.

Carver Seven thinks hard. He knows what this latest question means, but he does not know how to communicate Carrier Three's name, the beautiful arc of click-squeal-click, into the man's ugly wet language. Then his subroutines dredge up the sound unit the man used to wail at the sea, used to punctuate long rambling speeches with.

"She is Anita," Carver Seven says.

The muscles across the front of the man's head, around its ever-wet audio port and brown photoreceptors, twitch in response to the sound unit Anita. Carver Seven recognizes it now as distress. He wonders if he has made a language error. Then the muscles slacken again.

"Don't say that," it says. "You don't understand. Don't have a fucking idea. You're a robot."

"Can you fix it up a bit?" Carver Seven asks.

The man stares blankly at him, unresponsive.

"You say you make us in lab you know," Carver Seven says, trying to lay things out as clearly as he can. "Is it yes? Is it no? Make her good, please." He extends Carrier Three's head toward the man.

The man takes her, gentler than Carver Seven would have guessed from how it handles most objects, and holds her in soft fleshy manipulators. "You think I can fix your friend," it says. It makes the clipped noise, but only once. Its audio port is contorted. "Jesus. I'm not a roboticist, buddy, I'm an electrician. I . . ." Its sounds stop. "This why you been hanging around, then?"

Carver Seven can make no sense of it. Too many new sound units in new patterns, not enough context. "Can you fix it up a bit?" he repeats. "Make to see. Make to talk. Make to think."

The man looks down at Carrier Three's head. "Sure," it says, the sound coming quietly. "Okay. I'll fix your friend for you. I'll make your friend good."

The man is going to repair Carrier Three's lifelight. Carver Seven replays the sounds over and over to be sure he has divined the correct meaning. Each loop sends a fragile joy through him.

"But you have to do something for me, too, okay?" the man says. "You have to help me build this boat and get off this island. Okay?"

"Okay," Carver Seven says, not bothering to ask what this boat is. "Okay, okay, okay, okay, okay."

Carver Seven will help the man build, and in return the man will bring Carrier Three back to him.

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Over the course of the next three days, Carver Seven learns what a boat is: a collection of trunks and branches lashed together with vines in order to float on top of the sea, as a leaf floats on the surface of a puddle. The man explains it as they work.

The man is slow and clumsy and tires easily, but is also clever the way Recycler is clever. Always thinking a move ahead, always ready to change the plan when obstacles arise, when the wood starts to warp or the vines are too brittle.

It gives Carver Seven hope that the man will be able to fix Carrier Three. Often while Carver Seven works, shredding branches and sanding the logs smooth, the man sits in the shade with Carrier Three's head. It is difficult to keep his photoreceptors from straying to them. Whenever he looks over, the man is tapping Carrier Three with its soft manipulators, rapping out mysterious patterns, the muscles of its face clenched in what Carver Seven knows is concentration.

"I just need a few more days," the man says when he notices. "I'm getting there. Your friend is almost fixed."

"Okay," Carver Seven says, feeling a surge of optimism at the news. "Great, just fucking great."

The man pushes air from its audio port. "How is it you ended up cussing more than I do? I know I don't cuss that much."

"How is few?" Carver Seven asks. "Few is one few is two few is three?"

"Two," the man says, putting both manipulators to its sides, looking over the boat. "Few is two."

"Could be Anita fixed up and boat all finished few two days," Carver Seven says, hoping that the two events to coincide, that Carrier Three wakes up to see the finished boat Carver Seven has helped to build. She always liked to see the things Carver Seven made. She could always recognize the distinct marks and flourishes of his manipulators.

The man's face contorts as if it is briefly distressed. "Could be," it says. There is a long silence. "What do you think Anita means?" it asks softly. "When you say Anita, what's it mean to you?"

Carver Seven thinks hard, looping all his favorite memories of Carrier Three, the ones he views so often they have started to decay. The broad shape of her back, her thick sturdy joints. The proud way she made stacks of wood and stone look light as air. Her kindness. How she always saved the best material, an interesting piece of driftwood or a particularly soft wedge of rock, to share with him, to watch him shape. Their slow-moving strategy game, their familiar channel, their small secrets. All the things they had done before her lifelight was damaged.

"Anita is you need light to function," Carver Seven says. "Anita is you need and is gone."

"Yeah," the man says. There is lubricant shining in its photoreceptors. "Yeah. She was always a better swimmer than me. I don't know how it happened." The man wipes at its photoreceptors to clear them. "Look, buddy, you should take the head back. When I told you . . ." It falls silent, looking at the boat again. "You're just a robot," the man says, but to itself more than to Carver Seven. "And we're nearly finished. You better head off, tin man. Back to work bright and early tomorrow."

Carver Seven understands the sentiment. "Piss off, get out of here," he says, waving one manipulator in the gesture the man uses to end a work cycle.

"Yeah," the man says. "Same to you."

It is still staring down at Carrier Three's head when Carver Seven leaves the beach.

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As soon as he enters the village, Carver Seven can tell something is wrong. The air is thick with speech, with the click and buzz and squeal of the clan in deep discussion, but when Carver Seven tunes himself to the frequency he finds it slippery, fragmented. First he suspects he has been damaged somehow, but then he realizes that the truth is far worse. The clan has excluded him intentionally.

Shock numbs him for a moment. He has spent most of the past three days out on the beach with the man, but that is only because the workload in the village has

been light. The last storm caused little damage. The decision on a new fence to keep animals out has been delayed while the Cartographers debate its placement. Carver Seven has neglected no duties.

He moves slowly through the village, still grasping instinctively at the speech around him but understanding none of it. Photoreceptors follow his progress. It is only when he sees the other Carvers crafting fresh spears, when he sees Recycler squatting frozen in discussion with the clan's small and nimble Cartographers, that he begins to understand.

"Carver Seven, may Watcher-in-the-sky turn her gaze to you," Cartographer Two says.

Carver Seven feels relief, first, that he can understand again. Then dread.

"We are sorry to have excised you from the debate," Cartographer Two continues. "But it was felt that you are no longer impartial regarding the man. We have reached consensus without you."

Carver Seven looks at Recycler, but it would be disrespectful to ask her what she has done, and why, when being addressed by the clan.

"The man, by your own admission, seems able to think and communicate as a clan member would," Cartographer Two says. "Because of that, it must be held accountable for blaspheming. Does the man not claim to have created the clan? Usurping the role of Watcher-in-the-sky?"

There is only one truthful response. "Yes. It does claim this."

"Because of this blasphemy, we have decided the man will be shut down," Cartographer Two says. "We go to the man's shelter in the morning. Recycler has been given permission to disassemble and study its corpse afterwards."

Carver Seven looks at Recycler again and feels something he has never felt before. It reminds him of the man wailing at the sky, it reminds him that his blades are sharp and he could plunge them into Recycler and damage her, damage her, damage her. She has betrayed him.

Now the clan will kill the man, and his last hope for Carrier Three will die with it.

Recycler heads quickly toward the edge of the village, back toward her shelter and her flat rock. Carver Seven wants to tell the Cartographers what she does in the night, how she hunts and feeds and no longer needs Watcher-in-the-sky. He doesn't. He keeps her secret. But he follows her to the wood, and in a high piercing frequency, he speaks.

"All this so you can dissect the man," he says. "So you can suck its blood. You are no better than an animal, Recycler. May Watcher-in-the-sky avert his gaze forever."

Recycler is silent for a long moment. "I told the clan for your sake," she finally says. "So the man will not lie to you anymore. You will be grateful in the end."

Then she disappears into the forest, and Carver Seven does not follow her. Instead he goes toward his own shelter, the one with a widened frame for when Carrier Three sometimes wanted to pass the storm together. He stops on the way to pick up a branch full of thick green leaves. The other Carvers look over to him. He asks if they have sufficient spears to kill the man that is so fearsome, with its soft red skin and weak manipulators. They assure him they do.

Carver Seven has no tasks to complete. He can go dormant early if he wishes. He walks into his shelter and begins tearing the leaves off the branch, one by one.

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Carver Seven wakes up in the dark. It is terrifying. It feels like his photoreceptors have been gouged out, leaving him blind. But he has no time to be terrified. His early shutdown now gives him only a few moments of residual energy. He reaches for the crushed leaves and opens his hidden mouth.

The orifice whirrs and grinds and Carver Seven feels a different kind of energy, rough-edged and erratic, move through his body. It is nothing like the warm com-

forting pulse of Watcher-in-the-sky. It feels ugly. He sees why the clan forgoes its use apart from emergency, but this, he reasons, is an emergency.

The dark is awful, but Carver Seven knows where he is. He knows that the distances from the shelter to outside the shelter to the path to the beach have not changed. He starts to walk, hearing his invisible treadfeet slap against packed dirt, rustle against leaves and vines. He feels the forest swallow him and hears the sounds of animals. It is difficult not to imagine them stalking him through the forest, drawn to his heat. Some branches have moved since he last walked these footsteps and each one startles him as it whips against his body.

Finally, he hears his treadfeet rasp on sand. He is on the beach. And even better, there is light. Carver Seven can make out the shape of the shore in front of him, the spiky mass of the forest behind him, even the rippling sea. Confused, he looks up at the sky. It is not the black void he had always imagined it to be when Watcher-in-the-sky blanks her photoreceptor. It is full of small glimmering fragments that look like lifelights thrown up into the darkness.

Recycler never mentioned such a thing. Carver Seven wants to stare for longer, but there is no time. He turns toward the leaning shelter the man has made in a divot of sand. There is light there, too, from the dying embers of the fire the man sometimes makes to keep its body warm and alter meat before eating it.

Carver Seven does not want to make noise in case Recycler is awake, as he is. Instead he crouches and moves far enough inside the shelter to place his manipulator against the man's prone foot.

The man thrashes upright. "What the fuck?"

Carver Seven gives up on not making noise. "Back to work bright and early," he says. "Look who it is."

"It's the middle of the goddamn night," the man says. "I meant in the morning, and . . ." It rubs its photoreceptors. "Don't you shut down for night? There's no sunshine."

"Some time you gotta improvise," Carver Seven says. "In morning the man is no see, no think, no talk."

"What?"

Carver Seven struggles for a way to communicate the concept of involuntary shut-down. He is not even sure the man is aware of its own mortality. He picks up one of the spears, its tip stained red, and jabs it into the air.

"In morning, other tin mans hunting you," he says. "Other tin mans cut up you."

The man's photoreceptors go large and Carver Seven knows it understands. "Learning a new way, huh," it says. "Jesus. You're going to be us all over again. Predation is step one."

"I'll help out you," Carver Seven says. "Make you safe. But you have to do something for me, too, okay? Finish fix it up a bit Anita."

The man slumps. "You should just let them cut me up."

Carver Seven knows the man sometimes self-damages for reasons beyond his understanding, but there is no time to learn why. He looks around, sees Carrier Three's head set on a little mound of sand, and picks it up carefully.

"Nearly finished," he says. "Now finish fix it up a bit."

"I can't," the man says. "I have no fucking idea how a positronic brain works. I lied. I lied so you would help me with the boat. I can't fix your friend."

Carver Seven replays the sounds over and over, unwilling to believe it. The man can't fix Carrier Three. The man never could. Recycler was right.

"I did try." The man makes its clipped noise, just once. "I looked at the wiring and all. But that was done in a lab with lasers and microtools and . . . All that robot shit. I'm sorry, buddy."

"Anita is gone," Carver Seven says, to be sure, hoping desperately the man will

contradict him.

"Yeah," the man says instead. "Anita is gone." It rubs its head. "Don't think I've said it till now. Said it properly." It pauses. "I'm sorry."

"Why boat?" Carver Seven asks, because he has no way to articulate what he really wants to say, that he has the deep hollow feeling like Carrier Three is being disassembled all over again.

"Thought I'd try to get to the mainland," the man says. "See if any survivors got carried past this little spit. If any lifeboats made it. Doesn't matter, though. If I don't die here, I'll probably die in the sea. If I don't die in the sea, I'll die somewhere else. Doesn't matter."

Carver Seven thinks again of his sharp blades, how simple it would be to damage the man. Simpler still to let the clan do it for him. Then he thinks of Carrier Three's kindness.

"Nearly finished boat," Carver Seven says. "Tin mans no go sea. Boat make you safe." He goes to the last tree they felled and dragged, rolling it toward the others.

"You serious?" the man asks.

In answer, Carver Seven begins stripping the log, short sharp strikes, precise and rhythmic. He is a Carver, so he will carve. He will be kind how Carrier Three was kind.

"You're a better human being than I am," the man says. "You should know that."

"You should let's get to work," Carver Seven says.

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By the time the man declares the boat finished, the sky is changing color, turning purple and red. The glimmering lifelights up above them are fading away. Carver Seven asks the man what they are before they disappear completely, in case it knows.

"Stars," the man says. "They're stars in the sky."

"Stars in the sky," Carver Seven echoes.

The man pauses. "Some people, you know, they think we go up there when we die. They think our souls . . . our . . ." It taps its head, then its body. "They think a part of us gets to go up in the sky. And watch over the people who are still down here."

Carver Seven parses the information. He looks down at Carrier Three's near-dark lifelight, cradled in his manipulators, and wonders if maybe the other sparks are up in the sky. It seems improbable.

"If you want I could take her with me," the man says. "Just in case I meet some crazy roboticist."

"Anita is gone," Carver Seven says.

"Yeah." The man sucks in air through its audio port. "Thanks for helping me. Hope your people aren't going to be pissed at you. Other tin mans hunt you?"

"No," Carver Seven says. He'll tell the rest of the clan the truth, that the man must have floated away on its boat in the dark. He won't tell them he worked through the night to ensure it. Recycler will guess, maybe, but not tell the others. Carver Seven will apologize to her, and give her Carrier Three's head to finally recycle, but maybe ask that a small piece, just a tiny piece, be soldered to him.

"Good," the man says. "That's good."

Carver Seven uses one manipulator to help the man drag the boat as close to the waves as he dares, then steps back. The man hops on, making the wood bob in the water.

"Guess this is goodbye," it says, with its photoreceptors in danger of leaking lubricant again.

"Crying like a little bitch," Carver Seven says. "Get out of here."

The man makes its clipped noise, over and over, as it poles out into the waves.

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Carver Seven can't tell if it is distress or happiness. As Watcher-in-the-sky rises and warms his back, making his steps back toward the village smooth and strong, Carver Seven can't tell which he is feeling, either.