Building Connection: A short Xand story

The minutes ticked down. For the dozenth time, I paced the half-finished tinyhouse from one end to the other, a suboptimally small part of my mind on the job of looking over progress and noting tasks that needed attention; the rest, preoccupied by all the complexities and potential pitfalls that the upcoming day's activities - and, more to the point, personnel - would bring with them.

Guest influencers. Super able-bodied, straight, cis, basic gymbros - at least, that's how they present online. People whose usual content involves showcasing mad gymnastic strength, skill and style, with a large helping of extreme buffoonery. These guys, on my build site. Interviewing my people. What was I thinking?

Spotting me, Bianca, my 2IC, stopped what she was doing. "How you going, boss?" she asked, eyebrow cocked.

"Just quietly: petrified," I replied.

"Huh," she said, sounding surprised. "That's… unsettling. You're my model for unflappability, you know. Don't screw that up for me now."

Before I could think better of it, and in a serious departure from my normal guardedness, I said, "Wanna hear an unpalatable truth? I'm nowhere near unflappable. I'm just masked all to hell, all the damn time."

Her eyebrows shot up, and then she frowned, considering. "Ew," she remarked laconically, in the end.

"Right? So tedious."

"You know you don't need to do that for us, though, right? Yes we're your employees, but we're all weird, we don't need you to fake stuff."

"I do know that. If I had a choice, I'd do it differently. But I'm basically too old, hey. Masking has been essential kit for not dying out here for so long that it's now automatic. It's heavy, but I can't take it off. So: leakage only happens when I am seriously off balance."

"Which you are today?"

"Yup."

"Why?"

I quailed. *Enough vulnerability. Gotta lead; deflect, Xand.* "So many reasons. Too many to go into." *Primary among which: River West, Olympic Medalist in Gymnastics. One of the most problematic men I've ever had the dubious privilege to call a friend. And for whom I am, unaccountably, weak as hell. Which I am absolutely, in particular, not going into.*

She wasn't buying it. "Is it the filming?" she pressed.

"Yeah, that's a big part of it. I know it's potentially valuable publicity for the tinyhouse building co-op, and its mission, yadda yadda, but still: I don't love being publicly perceived like this."

"Xand, you're a professional theatremaker."

"I know. It's not as big a disconnect as it seems. Theatremaking is scripted and codified; this kind of vlogging is a profoundly differently constructed form. There are risks here. Exposure of the bad kind. Exploitation. Vulnerable folk getting harmed. You know."

"I think the possible benefits outweigh the risks."

"I hope you're right, and obviously I'll be involved in editing the footage, so I have at least some agency. I'm just… uncomfortable. I want it to be about the work and the product and the social enterprise benefits to community… not the personalities."

"But you have to know that selling stuff these days is all about relatability, telling engaging personal stories, that sort of thing."

"I do know that stuff, yeah - and it gives me the massive ick."

"How very Australian of you," she murmured, sounding like she had the mild ick herself.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, just that you seem to have internalised the whole 'Tall Poppy' thing to an unhealthy extent," she answered, lightly. I fixed her with a hard stare. "Just something to consider," she continued, raising both hands.

I drew in and released a deep breath. "Thanks, I guess," I drawled.

She drew breath to say something else; paused. I waited. Visibly mustering courage, she essayed, "Speaking of relatability, can I make a suggestion?"

"If you must," I replied, unable to keep a forbidding note out of my voice.

"Just: please try to be less scary than your usual, when it comes to our guests? I can cope, sort of, because I know and trust you, and I actually kind of enjoy the whole 'terrifyingly uncompromising hammer of righteous queer disabled wokeness' thing you have going on, because I share all those values. But, just from what I've seen of these guys online, I think that dealing with them on camera might benefit from a… gentler approach, okay? Don't kill me."

Again, I heaved a long sigh. "Yes, okay, I hear it. It's good advice. Which I probably needed, I suppose."

Bianca exhaled explosively. “Oh thank goodness,” she said breathily, relief apparent in her tone.

I considered her. “Am I really so scary?”

“Yeah, boss, you really are.”

“How so?”

“Well, there’s your look. Obviously you can’t do anything about being a beaky, craggy, 6 foot tall redhead with ice blue eyes. The viking braids don’t help much, but they’re fabulous, so I’m not saying change that. Or the muscles. I’m saying - you *look* intimidating, but I also know that your aesthetic is a choice you’ve made and continue to make consciously, and it… um, works well for you. But it contributes to a pretty unapproachable vibe. And then… you’re either not wordy at all, or you’re hyperverbal, with capital V Vocab. That’s also intimidating. But I reckon the thing that clinches it is that you are… *extremely* boundaried. You’re really clear - even blunt - about what you’ll put up with. You don’t suffer fools; you never let people treat you with disrespect. You speak truth even when you know it’s going to be received badly. You fight, when you think that fighting is the best approach, and you’re dogged and fearless and unapologetic about that. You aren’t a person to be trifled with, or crossed.”

“That’s all very flattering, Bianca, but I sense that there’s more to say.”

“Look: there is, but you’re scary and I’m scared.”

“What if I undertake to be as open as I can and not get ragey if I find myself becoming defensive?”

“OK.” She took a deep breath. “You’re grumpy. Don’t get me wrong, it’s earned: there is certainly plenty to be grumpy about. Still, it’s… prickly. Also, you’re judgemental. And somewhat arrogant, in the sense that you are very confident that you’re right about stuff. Which means that you don’t typically try to imagine yourself into the other person’s point of view, if it’s significantly different to your own.”

I smiled. “You’re saying, I’m autistic.”

She acknowledged my quip with a small, answering half-smile. “Maybe those traits play into a certain level of… orthodoxy, and obsession with justice? But also… you’re smarter than most people, and Xand, that’s not straightforwardly a compliment. It means, once you’ve weighed someone in the balance and found them wanting, you don’t necessarily fight fair. You use sarcasm and intellectual superiority to cut people down. You can make people feel really small and ashamed, and even if their behaviour makes that really tempting and arguably righteous, in my view it’s not actually the best approach, if the aim is changemaking.”

I paused for a long time, internalising this. Eventually, I said in as neutral a tone as I could muster: “Well, ouch. But also: interesting. I’ll think on it. Today, but also in general.” We looked at each other. She looked very like a bunny in headlights. I attempted to soften my

gaze; it didn't seem to help. *Actual words of reassurance, then.* "Genuinely, Bianca: thank you."

"No worries," she said, slightly breathily.

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As I waited for them to enter the tinyhouse-in-progress, I felt the skin at the back of my neck crawl with the consciousness that a pre-set camera behind me was rolling. *Alright, Xand. You can do this. You do actually really like these people. Just show it. Be friendly. Relatable. Not scary.*

Finally, Eric poked his head around the front door, on his face a comically, and completely fake, excited expression - he had already been in here in order to preset the camera.

"Get in here, you dag," I said through laughter. "Welcome to your very own future snail shell," I continued warmly, striding to meet him and clasping his hand. "Hi, fam," I murmured, with equal and genuine warmth, as I went on to hug Brooke, and shake AJ and River's hand.

River held my handshake for slightly too long. "Formal," he commented, undervoiced, with a slight smile and a mischievous twinkle.

I considered him. His dark blonde hair was freshly clipped, every hair curated. He was wearing handsome, brand new, obviously expensive work trousers and a Hilfiger t-shirt. He looked like a model. "Speak for yourself mate. You're exceedingly well turned out, for a working party."

He bowed over my hand, gesturing floridly. "I take this business seriously, you know," he murmured, finally releasing my hand. "This handshake malarkey is disappointing, though. I," he said, with a pro forma smoulder, "was looking forward to a good hard squeeze."

"Cut it out, you dag. I do not need every punter on the internet clocking that I basically live in your pocket these days," I murmured back.

"Do we embarrass you, then, Xand?" River said, expression now positively impish.

"The others don't," I shot back, grinning at him. He laughed.

"Shall we begin with a tour?" I offered the room at large. General enthusiastic agreement ensued; Brooke grabbed the camera, and I ushered them through the kitchen, bathroom, convertible sitting / sleeping area, and upstairs office. "Eric," I called over my shoulder, "just to check, you want your desk in the loft rather than downstairs, have I understood that correctly? Last chance to opt for a sleeping loft."

"No way," Eric demurred. "Sleeping in the hottest part of the tinyhouse and working in the coldest part seems ridiculous."

“Man after my own heart,” I murmured, shooting him a grin. “Let’s head out and meet your teammates,” I said after everyone had inspected the office mezzanine.

My build workers were assembled outside the tinyhouse. “Alright,” I said more loudly, addressing the whole group. “introductions! Brooke, AJ, River, Eric, pronouns are the obvious - meet Bianca, she/her, on cabinet making, Em, they/them, also on cabinetry, René, he/they, on tiles. Bianca is the head of the permanent build team. She nominally works to me, but pragmatically, she's the site boss and has at least as much of an overview of the build as I do.

“Ground rules. Do what these folks tell you. Don't screw around with tools. Don't run. Please, for God's sake, no gymnastics on site - there isn't room and the footage would render us uninsurable. Our volunteer insurance won't cover you for using grinders, nail guns, or circular saws, including tile saws. We've issued you with gloves and ear protection - use them. Measure twice, cut once is an aphorism for Reasons - do it. Frankly, I measure several times. I will, very high-handedly, be assigning each of you to a worker, who’ll use you as they see fit - yeah, yeah, let’s keep it vaguely PG, shall we, gentlemen? If you have a problem with your assignment, take it up with the big boss.”

“That’s you,” muttered River.

“Correct! Which will give you an idea of how well that’s likely to go. I’ll be floating, behind the camera when Eric isn’t, pitching in with build stuff wherever I'm needed… trying, just quietly, not to melt my head with rapid task switching. Also I will happily answer any questions you may have, and I’m actually serious about that - ask me anything. Nothing worse than an educator who experiences questions as a burden.” As River’s eyebrow quirked and he drew breath, I realised my mistake. Hastily, I followed up, “Sorry, correction: ask me anything *about the build*, River.”

“Dammit,” he said on an exaggerated sigh.

“Team one, with Bianca, will be making and installing kitchen cabinetry. Team two, with Em, will be doing the cool wall bed install, with a sofa underneath that appears when the bed is folded away. Team three, with Rene, will be on tiling in the bathroom.

“Right. Assignments: Team 1 - Brooke. Team 2 - River. Team 3 - AJ. Side note: the tiling isn’t remotely as boring as it sounds - you’ll be making a mosaic out of upcycled tiles, so it’s a kind of creative aesthetic tetris. I’m putting you on this because I trust you not to incorporate a sneaky cock and balls design. Don’t disappoint me, ok?”

“That’s just mean, Xand, to lay an idea down like that and snatch it away at the same time,” AJ pointed out mildly.

“You're a resourceful chap: I’m sure you’ll find a way to cope. Eric, you and I will be splitting the filming, so I don’t feel like I can really put you on a project that requires sustained attention. Having said that, there is an enormous amount of sanding and filling and painting of little bits here and there that you're welcome to pitch in with when you aren't shooting - it’s fiddly, boring work, but you’ll never be doing it for long, and it will make you look industrious

and humble for the punters' viewing pleasure. Also - just quietly - it's the sanding and filling and painting of little bits that turns something that looks cobbled together into something that looks *put* together."

"I stand at your command, O fearless leader," Eric murmured, bowing floridly. *Oh, you're gonna fit right in, you enormous nerd.* I grinned at him.

"Will you stop flirting with the boss, you giant arse-kisser?" River said to him in a mock-outraged tone.

"No," Eric replied, his tone reasonable. Why should you have all the fun?"

I stifled a laugh, shooting them both a totally fake steely gaze. "Be advised: the punishment for arseing about is…" I paused, dramatically, knowing that Eric would put appropriate jumpscare music into the gap - and went on, pitching my voice doom-low, "*pallet disassemblage duty*. Trust me: you don't want that."

"You really don't," affirmed Bianca. "It's boring and it hurts like hell."

"Sounds like gymnastics," said AJ and River in unison.

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It was not, ultimately, remotely as chaotic as I had feared it might be. I knew Brooke would rock it, and she did, bringing the entire, fierce suite of her intelligence, determination and knack for attention to detail to bear. Her dovetail drawers were micron-perfect and, once she had the technique, she pumped them out faster and faster. Bianca and I watched her work, admiring. Aside, BIanca said quietly, "I know she's usually into bears, but…"

"No, Bianca," I said, straightforwardly.

"OK boss," she chirped, and went back to work.

Eric flitted, almost deliriously cheerful, between filming and sanding/filling/painting. He was not fast, but he was meticulous, which was interesting. I knew his editing was deceptively expert - callback on callback, incredible care taken over really, really silly gags - the sillier the gag, the more elaborate the editing, typically. I wondered how efficient his process was. *Oh, good grief. Maybe I've signed up for a bottomless timehole.*

In contrast, AJ and Rene covered the first wall of the shower recess within 90 minutes, creating an incredibly tasteful monochrome abstract artwork. "Friends," I said with genuine admiration, "*nice* going. I'm assuming you've left yourself a similar mix of tile sizes for the other walls?"

"We have," they chorused triumphantly.

"I pity the poor bugger who has to come along after us and grout and clean all the joins," added AJ, grinning.

“That’ll probably be me,” I told him ruefully.

River did fine at the heavy lifting, which was good - the wall bed components were not light. The actual joinery on the other hand, basic though it was, went very slowly indeed. *Will you look at that. Things exist that you* aren’t *flamboyantly great at. I am sure the fact that I find that gratifying says something not-awesome about me as a person.* He was overly careful; scattered, despite making an obvious effort to focus. Frowning in concentration, he checked everything several times before making any markings. Between doing the cutting, Em was wonderfully cheerful, encouraging, patient and helpful, passing on the trick of reading the measurements aloud, one digit at a time. That seemed to help a little; still, after a couple of hours, Em approached me quietly.

“I think Riv’s having a bit of a Time,” they murmured.

“I get that same impression. How can I help?”

“I’m trying to reassure him, but he’s not really buying it, and I think it’s maybe not enough. From what I can tell, there might be… unsupported, ah, stuff, in play here, and we might want to switch tasks up. But I think that suggestion, also, would be better coming from a friend. You want to try talking to him, maybe?”

“Look, it may or may not do any good. River and I have a… fairly jangly communication style. Also, yanno, he’s a fragile little flower. But I’ll have a crack, and I’ll make my best attempt to be somewhat subtle about it.”

And so it was that I ended up more or less ditching the filming and the work with other teams, in order to pitch in with team 2.

I worked in with him as best I could, feeling an increasing heaviness in my chest as, sidelong, I witnessed his uncharacteristically silent struggle. After about an hour, I could bear it no longer. “How are you going, Riv?” I asked, quietly.

“I will not lie - being the measure-upper is *super stressful*,” he murmured.

“You want to say more?”

“Not… at the moment,” he murmured, looking over at Eric, who was filming us.

“Hey Eric, you wanna give us a minute? Or… several?” Eric ambled off, equably enough. “Em, are you at a point where you can take a break?” Em also acquiesced, downing tools and heading out. “How about now?” I asked, gently, after they had left. “No pressure to talk about it, Riv, but I might be able to help if I understand the scope of the issue.”

He paused for a long time before he spoke. “Remember I mentioned to you once, that I reckoned I might be a bit dyslexic? I get numbers jumbled also, eh. I have been banned from doing the books in any of my businesses because I cock up so often. Fine by me: I hate it. I can't do mental arithmetic to save my life, either. In this case, the millimeter / centimeter /

meter thing is also freaking me out. And given that actual materials stand to get wasted if I cock *this* up, it's even more stressful. Stress makes things… worse."

"OK. I hear it. Let's get you switched to a less brain breaking task."

"I should," he objected, sounding desolate, "be able to *do* this."

I considered him. "You could probably cudgel your brains into a kind of cooperation, at considerable energy cost and with a lot of misery. Why should you, though? It's doing your head in. There are people around who can take on that task without suffering. Let them; play to *your* strengths. Disability accommodations 101."

I realised my mistake instantly, as he blanched. "I am *not* fucking disabled," he bit out, undervoiced.

Ahhhhhhh dammit. I cannot, in good conscience, let that pass. "It's not a dirty word, River. I am disabled, for example. Do you value me less for it?"

"You're not."

"Mate, I absolutely am. And that is my call to make, not yours. I don't work the way other people do, and that's true in ways that - believe it - disable me. Considerably. To the extent that you don't see it, it's because I hide it from you, not because it isn't happening. And to be clear: my hiding my disability is not a good thing. It speaks to my internalised ableism, hey. Being disabled isn't something anyone should have to apologise for or be ashamed of; not something that should carry any freight of emotion or judgement whatsoever. Disability is part of the human condition, and denying that is both ridiculous and cruel." He looked at me, eyes troubled and sceptical. "What, West? You think I'm lying? Or does my owning the fact that I'm disabled just give you the ick?"

Instead of answering, he said, "If owning your disability is your call, don't I have just as much right *not* to identify as disabled?"

"Sure. Not everyone with a formal diagnosis identifies as disabled. Conversely, lots of people without a formal diagnosis *do* identify as disabled, and that is also legit, by my lights, given the ridiculous barriers to getting a formal diagnosis. But if there's no judgement attached to the term, if it's just a descriptor, why *shouldn't* you own it? For the sake of opening up opportunities to get what you need to function optimally, apart from anything else?"

"I don't want to… need that kind of thing. I don't want to feel weak. Stupid. Imperfect."

I breathed a black chuckle. "I note that those are all judgements, and pretty uncharitable ones at that. Not that I am unsympathetic. Needing shit from others and hating it; giving yourself hell for not being able to be radically self-sufficient? It's a mood. But I know for a fact that you don't *actually* believe you're weak or stupid - nor does anyone who's ever met you, I reckon. Neither do you think you're perfect, so I don't really understand why you would object to imperfection."

“Being imperfect is not the same as being crippled.”

“‘Cripple’ is a slur. Disabled isn't.”

“Oh come on. It's all just words, Xand.”

“It's all just microaggressions, River. Cut it out. Not kidding.” We glared at each other. Attempting to moderate my tone, I added, “Why are you fighting me so hard, man? At the risk of freaking you out, I’m going to quote your own words at you. ‘I need help. All the time.’ Man, watching you talk about vulnerability absolutely undid me, in the best way. I remember thinking - here’s someone who has it in him to change shit seriously for the better. You talked openly, apparently without fear or shame, about anxiety, depression, addiction, suicidal ideation. About some stuff being incurable, and needing management - which, in my book, also means accommodations - forever. Plus all the stuff about community care, reaching out, not suffering in silence. Someone with your platform normalising those struggles is huge, Riv. And you’re *so close* to getting it. One more step, beyond radical self-responsibility, beyond community care. To understanding that you - that *everyone* - sits in a systemic context, and that many aspects of that context are super problematic. For anyone who deviates from the ‘norm’ - including you, West, whether you ‘identify as disabled’ or not - systemic stuff can be particularly toxic. Because that ‘norm’ is a fantasy concocted by a bunch of wilfully blinkered science dudebros whose supposedly unbiased baseline for determining ‘normativity’ is a tiny cohort of young, able-bodied, university educated, cis straight white men. And that isn’t an accident. It’s about keeping power in the hands of the few by oppressing the many: by characterising anything non-normative as ‘weakness’, the aim is to isolate people from one another, so that they lack the resourcing to fight back against systemic injustice.”

“Xand, come on. Disability *is* weakness.” *OK, so the systemic stuff is absolutely lost on you: unsurprising, if disappointing.*

“Oh? I am non-male, queer, neurodivergent, and as aforementioned: you bet I am disabled. Am I weak?”

“You’re not a good example, though.”

“Why aren’t I? So many disabled people present more or less like me. The idea you have in your head of folk with hidden disability being a bunch of lazy, responsibility-avoidant grifters, lying around whingeing and expecting to get shit for free? It’s just wrong, Riv. We are some of the toughest, hardest-working people alive, despite everything. Also - an extreme version of that same normative mindset says that being non-white is weakness. Your best friend is a person of colour. Is Liam weak?”

“No. Absolutely not, and I would never say that.”

“I know that, Riv. But this is what I mean. Normative thinking is a scam at best, man, and incredibly toxic at worst. It erases the lived experience of the vast majority of humankind. With respect to disability in particular, it ignores the basic, undeniable truth that disability will inevitably become part of every single human life, sooner or later, barring sudden premature

death, which isn't exactly an alternative to wish for, is it? What I'm saying is: to strip someone's dignity away because they're disabled is to dehumanise *everyone*.

"I stand against that entire edifice, if that wasn't already clear. I aim to have *universal* accessibility woven into the fabric of any work I do. More: I believe that my approach should be the default in every workplace, and I reckon it's absolutely disgusting that it isn't. It's my honour to accommodate. It is an honour, even when it's hard to do. In this particular case, though, it's a really easy fix, and it'll benefit the project and everyone involved in it. I'm saying: identify however you like, I suppose. It's gross, if you ask me, to refuse to stand in solidarity with other neurodivergent folk, but as you point out, that's your call. But just - accept the bloody help, please."

"I'm not *neurodivergent,* either," he ground out flatly.

"West. Systemic and political considerations aside, you've got a documented, medical history of depression, addiction, anxiety. You are self-diagnosed obsessive-compulsive, dyslexic, dyscalculic, all of which I absolutely buy. Just quietly, the fact that you've dealt with a lot of that unsupported absolutely sucks and is massively unjust, and you should be angrier about it, if you ask me. And actually, I would lay heavy bets you're also an ADHDer." He blinked. "Please don't tell me this is the first time you're hearing that. It's wild to me that you have flown under the radar this long. If I'm right, there are… *meds*, man. They might change your life out of recognition, you know. Anyway, my point: any one of these things, in isolation, makes you neurodivergent by the actual, scientific definition. You can deny it all you like - facts are facts."

He did not answer. He stared at me, his mouth a flat, lipless line, all colour gone from his face.

Far more gently, I went on, "Please don't misunderstand me: *the* last thing I mean by this is that any of what you're dealing with makes you lesser. You know yourself how 'hard stuff' can be a teacher, or even a superpower, depending on context and management strategies. All any of it means is that you have certain needs, which is allowed. Also: true for everyone. People's needs deserve respect at least, and accommodation where needful. That is fucking all. I ask again: *why are you fighting me so hard?*"

He sighed, ran a harried hand through his hair. "I don't even know any more. You've talked so much that I lapsed into a coma. Just tell me what you propose by way of… bloody *accommodations*, ok? I haven't got any fight left in me."

"OK, Riv. Here's what I've got: Em can measure and cut. You're excellent with three dimensional space. You can assemble the pieces from the schematics; I'll check you, and once we agree it's all good, I'll show you how to use the pre-drilling jig. You can pre-drill and countersink, and I'll come along behind with glue and screws. Ok?"

"Could you not have just said that in the first place?" he muttered.

“I was actually trying to help, mate. That whole tangent happened because I couldn’t come at you giving yourself, unjustly, such a hard time. I can’t be doing with letting the internalised voice of patriarchal violence have the last word.”

He paused for a long time, clearly torn between several flavours of grumpy riposte. And then, astonishingly, he began, helplessly, to laugh. “You are so *weird*, man,” he wheezed. “I buy it. You genuinely intended a half hour harangue about systemic ills and disability and accommodations… to be helpful to me.” He subsided to the floor, ending up on his back, hugging his knees, cackling.

Somewhat pleadingly, I heard Eric say, “Can I come back and film again, now, please? Hate to miss the shenanigans.”

“Oh, it’s not shenanigans,” River drawled, still laughing a bit, “so much as me being held at moral gunpoint, once again, by the one-enby Woke Patrol.”

“Ah, shit. Can’t believe I missed it.”

Whereas I am profoundly relieved that none of that made it onto any kind of recording.
“Wouldn't have let you use it anyway,” I said - just as River said the exact same words. We turned to each other. He grinned; I did not. “Jinx,” he said quietly. The warmth of his tone made it sound almost like an endearment.

I became aware that I was staring at him, motionless, expressionless. I took a moment to shake out my arms and legs and scratch my head. The movement helped a bit, but not much.

River caught it. “You alright?” he asked me, still quietly.

“Yeah,” I said; half-voiced, half-convincing, half-lie. *Far out, West. Being in your ambit certainly remains very, very unsettling*.

On the other hand, as we got back to work, River’s mood lightened abruptly. Possibly the fact that his new brief suited him exceedingly well helped; I strongly suspected that the laughter had also provided a necessary discharge of tension. He worked fast, well, and with near-maniacal cheer. the framing for the wall bed materialised in record time. I fought off, barely, the temptation to say ‘I told you so’. The frame complete, Em explained the next part of the job to River, and then began securing cladding and beading rapidly onto the front face of the frame while River, sharp-eyed, smiling, anticipated Em’s next move, holding ends, handing across materials, swapping sides unfalteringly, his ludicrously conditioned, diminutive body moving through the space like a dancer.

Watching them - or, more accurately, him - made me feel increasingly destabilised; still, I stood around empty-handed, doing nothing much, helplessly, for a number of minutes before the itch to make myself useful (or, to name it up completely: Useful At All Times Because Boss On Worksite Must Model All The Correct Behaviour) won out over the compulsion to follow River’s every move. Waiting for a moment when they were absorbed in a tricky manoeuvre, I made my best attempt to leave them to it by stealth.

As I went, I felt a subtle tightening at the back of my head. Simultaneously, I heard Em say with mild amusement, “Riv, eyes here please.” River mumbled an apology in response. *Dammit. Didn’t get away clean, it seems.* I felt my steps slow; schooled myself to continue walking away in my previous, faster tempo.

Just before I was out of earshot, I heard Em say drily, “Oh, no need to apologise. I’m sure we’ve all watched Xand walk away, from time to time.” *What?*

On a dark, rueful chuckle, River answered, “Good to know it’s not just me, I suppose.”

What??