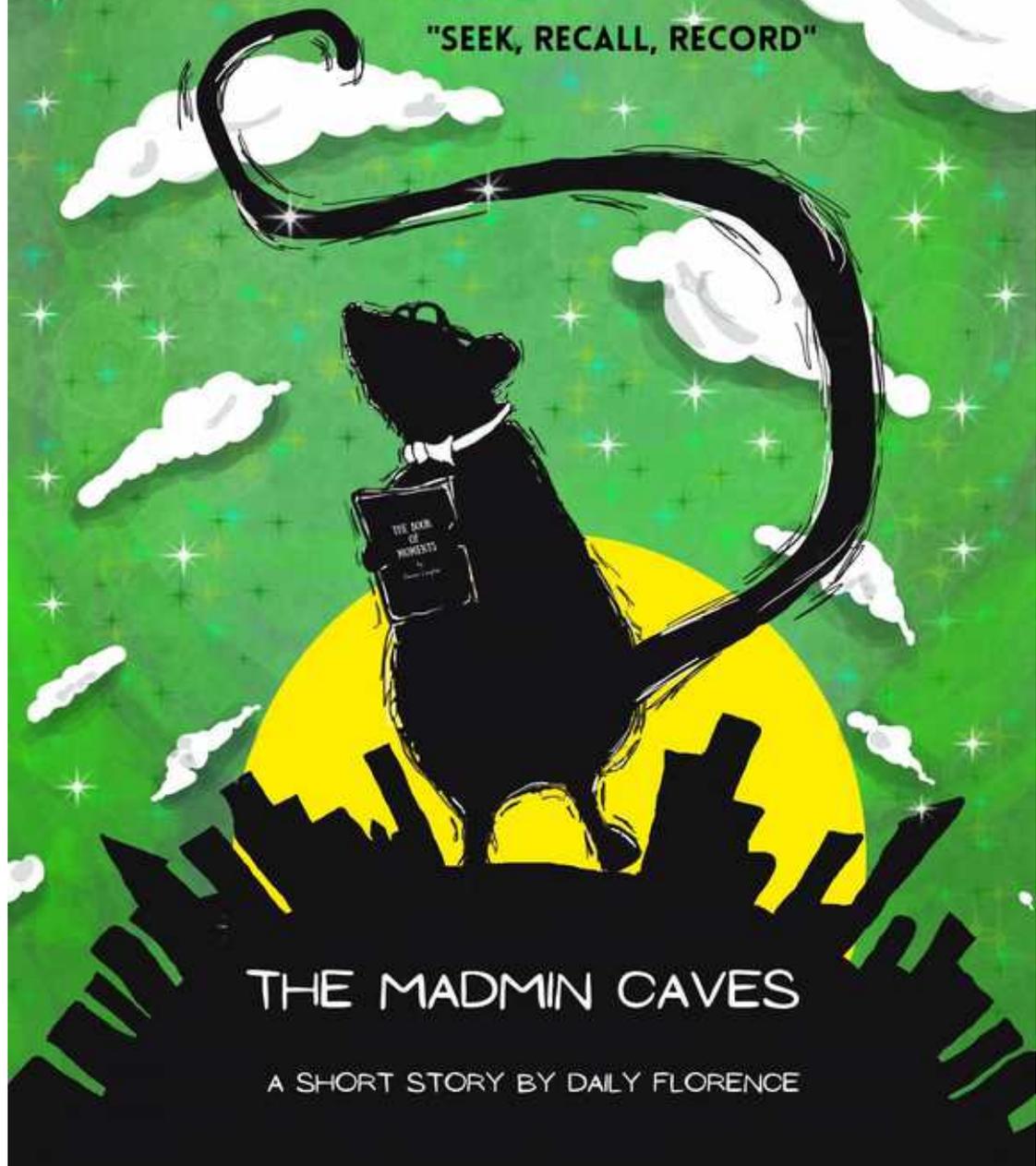


The End of Longtails

"SEEK, RECALL, RECORD"



THE MADMIN CAVES

A SHORT STORY BY DAILY FLORENCE

The End of Longtails

Short Space Stories From Orb Central Library

THE MADMIN CAVES

By Daily Florence

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DISCOVERMOREBOOKSBYDAILYFLORENCE

The Greatest Race in the Universe
Grace: Exactly How Bad Can a Midlife Crisis Get?

Dedicated to Felix & Graihagh xxx

THE MESSAGE

“Far above the rooftops lies the path to my planet — a path you have no doubt walked past on many occasion. But the next time you do, I must insist that you stop and take note because this is no ordinary path, it is “The Path of Moments”, a path so formidable that it leads to every moment to have ever taken place in the universe. It's an endless glittering haze of stars that lead to every adventure to ever exist, every memory that has ever been created, and to every life that has ever been lived.

When the clouds on Earth allow, look to the dark skies and you will see the Milky Way Galaxy above. The Path of Moments is a cloudy, hazy tube shape, made up from a hundred billion stars that stretch across the sky and lead to every corner of the universe.

I live in the next galaxy over on planet Orb, amid the far reaches of the Canis Major Dwarf Galaxy. Travel The Path of Moments and you will eventually come upon my planet, sitting quietly in space, spinning in its beautiful creamy green light. Nobody has ever bothered us there mind, we are so far out of the way, although we do venture out. Space Collectors are our inter-galactic explorers on planet Orb and I couldn't wait to be one.

At the Orb Central Library, where I worked as a librarian, those who rose up through the ranks could achieve Space Collector status, which meant that they could travel the path and collect moments (or what you earthlings would call stories) from other planets which they would take back to record in Orb Central Library for all of eternity. That was my path in life, my reason for being... until the unbelievable happened.

The truth is, the moments in my story began at the beginning of time, but I will start this story on the first day of my diversity program at Orb Central Library. Up until that point in time, us Longtails had been the only breed of animal of Planet Orb to so much as set foot in the Orb Central Library, and for good reason too — not that I had listened.

If you are reading this then it means that somebody on Earth has found my moments that I saved from Orb Central Library and sent down the path. Please send help. My name is Denver Longtail and I was a communicator who lived at 4A Whispering Lane, Orb Central City, Planet Orb, in the far reaches of the Canis Major Dwarf Galaxy. I was a librarian at the Orb Central Library who lived to seek, recall and record and these are my moments, in fact, they are the only moments to now exist, there is nothing left, the Universe is gone.”

PROLOGUE

It all started with a meow, a long, lingering, hypnotic meow that made my ears twitch to attention. In front of me that day stood Kitty Stevens, a tall, slender and oh-so-graceful ex-student of the University of cat. As I slowly pushed the sign-up form toward her, I studied her whiskers as she spoke, it seemed that despite her words being directed at me, her eyes were casually studying the empty room as if a large crowd had gathered and I was the least interesting animal in the vicinity.

Her attention, however, suddenly snapped back in my direction.

'A pen, do you have a pen?'

'Y, yes.'

Kitty Stevens took a seat in the empty room and began filling in a form as I tried to look busy, polishing my spectacles and doing my absolute darnedest not to look at the clock.

Today was such a big day for me, I was making history in the Orb Central Library with my brand-spanking-new diversity programme. You see for as long as any of us on Planet Orb can remember, us Longtails have been the only species of animal to ever set foot in our beautiful Library — until today that is.

Throughout history, Longtails have been referred to as 'communicators', a gifted race with the ability to store and recall every moment that we have ever been told or lived. We are known as “the preservers of moments, the seekers of fact”.

As natural as it is to you that you must sleep, us Longtails must seek, recall and record: with Orb Central Library being our epicentre of worship to our craft.

Soon enough Kitty Stevens had finished filling in her form. 'Would I be the only recruit this year?' she said as she picked fur from her pristine dress.

I placed my spectacles on, fought off a nervous giggle and stared intently at the door.

But just as the internal panic and hallow silence in the room began conjoining inside of me into a thundering volcano, the door burst open and in walked a Deer wearing a stripy top and a pair of creased chinos. But rather than acknowledge either of our existence, the Deer headed straight for an empty seat, plonked himself down and face-planted the table with a deep sigh.

Undeterred, I didn't stop for so much as a single moment to acknowledge the weirdness of his entrance. Rather, I raised my shiny nose and shouted over to him in a highly professional tone. 'Hello Sir, if you could just fill out this form then that would be fantastic,' and began waving a sign-up form in his direction.

Without moving an inch, the Deer raised one hand above his head and began grasping at the air, causing Kitty Stevens to swing her head back around and shoot me a cold stare. I still wasn't owning anything. Instead, I scurried past her, slammed the sign-up form into the Deer's hand and sauntered over to the door where I hung my head out, leaving the rest of my behind positioned firmly inside the room.

'Of course, you're both terribly early,' I shouted back to the pair as my head searched the long winding hallway for even so much as a hint of a stray animal. 'Which, and I must say, is awfully decent of you both considering this is your first day.'

What the hell was I on?

I gripped my mouth in horror as I imagined the confused look that was now sweeping Kitty Steven's face as she caught sight of the clock — she'd been bang on time. The Deer, I was fairly certain, I didn't need to worry about.

But in the distance, walking aimlessly in various directions, I spotted a slow-moving elderly Rhino hanging off the arm of a miffed looking Giraffe.

'Yoo-hoo, here, I think you're both here,' I shouted, waving my arms frantically in the air.

They both trekked toward me. And, whilst at first, I felt thoroughly delighted to make their acquaintance, I noted the feeling wasn't mutual as they approached at the speed of a slug.

The elderly Rhino waved her walking stick at me. 'Where're the signs? Young man, answer me now, how do you expect us to find our way around with no signs? How did we even get here?'

The Giraffe peeled the elderly Rhino's hand off his and glared at me.

She was right, I'd totally forgotten to put signs up. Orb Central Library was a maze of underground tunnels that Longtails had no problem navigating but the same can't be said for other animals.

'I'm terribly sorry,' I said, ushering them inside.

I studied the Giraffe as he passed, there was something about him making my whiskers stand on end. 'Do we know each other?' I asked. But rather than stop to greet me, he mumbled something then waltzed straight in the room.

Right behind them, a buffalo in a dapper black suit followed by a well-dressed Rabbit stepped through the door. I sighed with relief as I ushered them in.

It was hardly the turnout I'd expected for my new diversity programme, but at that point, if I could rate my optimism on a sliding cheese scale, ten lumps of cheddar being 'I think I'm going to take over the world' and no cheese being 'I may as well just die now', then I would comfortably be sitting at an eight with my relentless positivity and winning smile.

So there'd been a few mishaps, true, and neither was it the turnout that I had expected, also true, but, you know what, they looked a respectable bunch and I couldn't wait to get stuck into my welcome speech, followed by an inspiring tour of our spectacular library, which I was sure they were going to love. I slapped my little hands together and skipped to the front of the room and got started.

'It's just so lovely to have you all here,' I began. 'You are all the first of any other race of animal on Planet Orb to so much as step into our beautiful library, let alone get a job as one of our employees. You're making history as we speak.'

I looked around for even the faintest bit of enthusiasm but noted a room full of deadpan faces.

My cheese scale slid down slightly but I forged on.

'As employees of Orb Central Library, it will be your responsibility to seek, recall and record the truth. Together, with me as your team leader, we will fight the biggest threat to the moments of Orb and our inhabitants: fake news. It is our job to ensure that only truthful moments that take place on planet Orb are published and submitted to our precious Orb Central Library collection so that they can exist for all of eternity. Now, talking of fake news, I could give you some examples, but how about you share with us some of your own stories and how that has affected you personally. That would be much more exciting. Anyone?'

At this point, I expected maybe one or possibly two to raise their hand, but each animal shot their hands up faster than I could say 'cheese'. Even the Deer, who still had his face flat to the table, had his hand in the air. I had to ask.

'So,' said the Deer. 'Like my Mom was doing this diet club thing, like Fat Cows Diet Club or something like that, and anyway, after two weeks she'd lost a load of weight but a news report came out saying that the founder of it. What's her name?'

'You mean Moomoo?' said the Buffalo.

'Yeah, Moomoo. Well she, like, had been messing with her own weight loss photographs so everybody thought she was skinnier than she was. Anyway, me Mom read this and like went into some like massive depressing episode where she literally didn't get out of bed for like a week. It was the worst thing that ever happened to her, worse than when me Nan died. She like seriously ate everything too, like the rest of us were starving cause like she ate the house out and didn't get out of bed. At one point I thought we were all going to die. Anyway, like seven days after the undercover report we found out that it was fake news and that Moomoo wasn't really fat. The Deer lifted his head from the table with a surprised look across his face. 'Honestly, like, I don't know what's wrong with people? We all nearly died.'

At first there was a silence amongst the other recruits as they processed the Deer's sad predicament at the hands of the fake Fat Cows Diet Club news. All the while the Deer looking around at them with mouth hanging low and hands spread out wide.

I for one placed my hand over my mouth in order to hide my utter disbelief, sure in my mind that everyone else in the room was suffering the same internal misery as I.

I mean, where did I start?

She'd only been going for two weeks. Why did no one else at the Deer's house eat? How come she ended up so depressed? How did she eat the house out when she never got out of bed? Someone had to be feeding her? Why didn't they feed themselves at the same time? My brain began to hurt so I decided to break the silence by casually thanking the Deer for his input but, to avoid a scene, chose to ignore the glaring ludicrousness of his story — it was clear that there was going to be a lot of work to be done when it came to that Deer — but before I could even open my mouth, a vocal eruption of sympathy burst from all of the new recruits and caught me off guard.

'That's awful,' they said. 'How is your Mom now?' 'Have you thought about counselling?' 'I know a good lawyer you know?'

My sliding cheese scale plummeted as the new recruits turned to me for my opinion on this deluded Deer's tragic tale. Every part of me wanted to call this Deer out but for the sake of my job there was no way I could.

I stuttered, realising the impossible feat that was unfolding before me. This was exactly why so many of the other Longtails we're so against this new diversity programme at the Orb Central Library. I had taken no such notice of them. Forging on, I simply wanted to prove myself, to my family, to everyone, what I could achieve. What had I done?

But then it got worse. Kitty Stevens scrunched her face up and turned to the Deer. 'I'm sorry but have you ever seen a skinny cow?'

'Um, well, no, never.' The Deer scratched his antler.

'Has anyone ever seen a skinny cow?' Kitty Stevens said to a room of shaking heads.

Inside I died a little, realising exactly what she was going to say next and knowing full well there was nothing I could do about it.

'Because skinny cows don't exist, just fat cows. Hence the name 'fat cows'. Cows are fat that's what they do. F—A—T—C—O—W. Fat cows.'

The Deer gripped his antlers with two hands, a look of pained confusion sweeping his face. 'Well, I, well, what are you saying, like...'

However, Kitty Steven's attention suddenly swung to the Giraffe. 'Hey, aren't you that, that politician? What's his name...'

The Buffalo shot his hand in the air and pointed straight at the Giraffe. 'It's you,' he said, slamming his hand into the table whilst laughing. 'That disgraced politician who got caught stealing the Government funding that was meant for the dog yoga retreat.'

'Oh, oh yeah. It is you,' the Rabbit joined in. 'Mr Longneck'. The Rabbit roared with laughter. 'Wife sent you did she?'

'I'm dealing with it aren't I?' Mr Longneck shot each of them an icy stare, causing each and every one of them to slowly but surely calm their laughing down. All except the Rhino who was staring aimlessly at the ceiling.

At this point, I was about to rudely change the subject to a more positive one when I spotted Mr Longneck, the Giraffe, studying the face of the Buffalo who was raising his shoulders and sinking into his seat to avoid him. 'Don't I know you?'

'No,' the Buffalo said as he casually used his hand to cover his face.

'You're that banker. The one who caused the whole of the Orb central bank to collapse. Yes you are, it's totally you. You're a fine one to talk.'

I gulped air at an alarming rate. Boris was right, I knew his face too.

'Not my fault was it?'

The Rabbit sat up and snarled through her teeth. 'Not your fault? I lost all my money in that bank and all you got was community service. I thought I knew your slimy face. My whole life ruined. I was rich and famous but lost everything because of you....'

'Oh yeah, you're that reality star,' shouted Kitty Stevens. 'From that TV show, Rabbit Island. I wondered what happened to you.'

The Rabbit gripped the edges of the table and glared at the Buffalo. 'Yeah, does the name Coco Nibbles ring a bell? Lovely to work with you.'

The Buffalo sank farther into his seat whilst I fought off a nervous giggle from exploding in my mouth.

‘If you would all just excuse me for the briefest of seconds,’ I casually said with one finger in the air before diving underneath my desk. I breathed in heavily whilst I crouched on all fours, slowly banging my head onto the wooden leg of the table where no one could see me.

I wanted to quit right there. Throw in the towel, run for the door and never come back. But then this voice sprang into my head, my Grandfather, telling me how proud he was that I was the only one of his thirty-something grandchildren to follow in the family tradition of becoming a librarian. And then another voice, Vince, a fellow librarian and team leader who hated my guts, telling the Board of Directors how he knew all along my diversity programme was a terrible idea and how much of a failure I really was.

I felt a second wind coming.

There was no way I could quit now. I took a sharp breath in, moved my sliding cheese scale back up to a perfectly respectable four and then leapt up from behind the desk.

‘Right then folks, glad we have all got to know each other a little better,’ I said, slapping my little hands together. ‘Let’s move this along to an exciting tour of the library.’

I smiled sweetly as I skipped past their aloof faces and toward the door. ‘Now then, take a left and it’s the big doors at the end, I will meet you all there.’

Once in the corridor, I took to my heels, scampering like the wind, I burst into the library door with arms spread out wide.

It was a busy day in the library, hundreds of Longtails taking up every desk in the enormous circular room, their heads buried deep in books, faces sullen and mouths hushed. I immediately spotted Mr Sigvald and the rest of the Board of Directors huddled in a group. I ran over.

‘Well, well, it’s been a great start to the meeting,’ I said, in the most delightful tone I could muster whilst trying to secretly catch my breath. ‘I would like to say that I think, you know, that there’s lots of work to be done but I’m sure it’s achievable with a bit of work and tim...’

Behind me, the door to the library suddenly burst open and the sound of shuffling of feet broke my concentration.

Each and every Longtail in the room removed their nose from their book and looked in the direction of the door.

Then the elderly Rhino’s voice rang out as loud as day... ‘Well I never,’ she said. ‘That’s a lot of bloody rats if I ever did see them.’

The oxygen levels in the library took a sharp turn for the worse as the Rhino’s voice ricocheted between every bookcase.

Behind me, I could hear Vince letting out a small growl, beside me a sea of outraged faces, and in front of me the new recruits shuffling in with hands covering their faces and shaking heads — the politically incorrect Rhino still absolutely none the wiser.

Rats, she called everyone rats, I silently screamed to myself.

This was terrible, what was I going to do?

Then the reality of what I had done slammed into my mind like a flying tortoise.

I'd only just hired a bad-tempered elderly Rhino, who probably doesn't even know where she is, a disgraced politician who embezzled Government funds, an ex-banker whose probably just got out of community service, a teenage Deer who's Mother had no doubt forced him to come here, an ex-reality star who wants to kill the Buffalo, and Kitty Steven's, the drop-out daughter of an A-list celebrity, to undertake one of the most complicated and important jobs to exist on planet Orb.

I was descending into Longtail hell with a first-class ticket and no cheese.

How the hell was I going to fight fake news with this bunch of monkeys?

So I did the one and only thing that my involuntary bodily movements would let me do at that point. Let out the biggest, most inappropriate, badly timed nervous laugh that planet Orb had ever seen.

'Rats,' I screamed at the top of my voice, whilst slapping my left leg and tears of laughter rolling down my face. 'She said rats!'

THE CAVE DRAWING

Somehow moms' always know when something is up, especially when you're trying to hide it. Despite having thirty-something Longtail children to look after, my Mom can literally smell a bad mood across a breakfast table. Whilst I, on the other hand, have a knack for spotting when she's onto me. It's simple really, she reels off questions followed by answers disguised as more questions.

'Denver, are you eating your breakfast or staring at it? What's wrong? Don't like the new cheese? Upset tummy? Have you been eating cat food again? Did you get a good sleep? Has one of your brothers been singing in their sleep again? Where're your spectacles? Do you have a headache? Tell me, how did yesterday with the new recruits go? Badly?'

I raised my voice over the noise of my brothers and sisters. 'Everything is fine, Mom.'

'So, what did..' My Mom swiped my little sister off the kitchen sink. 'I mean, what are the new recruit... Hey, get your tail off his cheese now. And you. Cut that out. I want your plate clear, do you hear me? If you even think about it I'm going to....'

'Mom, I'm late. I'll take my cheese with me.'

'Oh, I'm sorry Denver,' my Mom said as she prised two of my squabbling brothers apart. 'How about we catch up tonight...'

I knew exactly what she was about to say so I had to move fast. Before my Mom could so much as finish her sentence, I leapt from the table, ground the heavy oak door in the kitchen closed and scurried out of the house. Once outside, I breathed a sigh of relief as I stepped onto the cobbled streets and watched as my Mom waved to me from the kitchen window.

The truth was, our cramped, damp apartment, with my riotous brothers and sisters, was not helping my mood one little bit — not after yesterday's disaster with the new recruits.

That said, I loved the walk to work every morning, it was the perfect place to gather my thoughts. Unlike Earth, our pale-green skies twinkled with stars and rolled with creamy clouds during the day. Every morning, the sun would rise over the stone-brick skyline, giving a nod to the animals of Orb to start their day.

Deep in the city, where I lived, each and every street corner was occupied with news stands and radio broadcasts, where swathes of well-dressed commuters would consume the information as they flowed past.

It would be fair to say, after yesterday's totally tasteless laughing fit in the library, that I was not looking forward to seeing any of the other longtails at the library; therefore, I needed to think up a plan before arriving at work. However, so deep in thought was I, trying to conjure up some hair-brained excuse that, I'd hardly noticed a commotion going around me.

Slowly but surely, the sound of meowing cats in the distance fell into earshot. I

stopped dead in my tracks and watched as every animal in the street came to a standstill, listening on with ears perked and wide eyes.

A cat tiptoed toward me and whispered. 'Can you hear what they're saying? You're a Longtail. I know you can hear better than any animal. Tell me what they're saying...'

'I, um, well, it's hard to hear,' I said.

Then, as if a breeze had somehow swept the crowds and whispered to all that I was a longtail, all of the animals in the street turned to face me.

I felt my blood pressure rise rapidly as they shot a desperate look in my direction. To my right, I spotted a dog with a black marker in his hand, hunched over a blackboard in front of his news stand — his eyes burning a hole in my mind.

A Rabbit tiptoed toward me. 'I can't hear either,' the Rabbit whispered. 'Come on. I know you know. Tell us. Tell us all.'

I felt a bead of sweat drip down my forehead as I straightened my ears. 'Shh. Shh then,' I said. 'I, well, it's, they've found something, something in the..'

'What is it? For Pete's sake tell us. What is..' the Rabbit blurted out as he gripped tightly to my waistcoat and shook me with two hands.

'Shut up. Will everyone just shut up for a moment.' I raised my ears and tried again, the faint meows in the distance were getting louder. 'They've found something in the Madmin caves. A body of a human dra....'

Before I could so much as finish my sentence, the tiptoeing cat beside me suddenly screamed at the top of her lungs. 'They've found the body of a human in the Madmin caves.' Her voice carried like a sonic boom down the street.

All of a sudden I felt the blood surge to my head as I instinctively turned to my right to see that the dog with the marker pen had already filled in his news board and it now read, "Human Body Found In Madmin Caves".

I gripped my mouth, watching in horror as screams bounced from ear to ear between the commuters in the street.

'No,' I shouted to everyone, as loud as my little Longtail lungs could muster. 'No, you've got this wrong. I didn't mean that.'

'Then what do you mean?' said the cat beside me with a tut. 'You said that, didn't you?'

'Me. It wasn't me,' I said, pointing back at the loud-mouth cat. 'You just went and shouted that out. I hadn't finished my sent...'

'Well then, Mr, I don't mean what I say, what exactly did you mean then?'

I gripped my head. 'Cave drawings. The body of a human drawn in stone.'

The cat looked me up and down and let out a huff. 'Then what the hell is wrong with you, lad? Why didn't you just say that straight off?'

My stomach churned as I watched the bedlam unfolding around me. Animals were tearing around at speed, wailing in terror, shielding their children and drawing all of their savings out of cash machines.

I instinctively looked to my right again. That darn dog with the black marker was hurling papers from his news stand with quite possibly one of the biggest smiles I had ever seen wiped straight across his face — still with the wrong information written on his board.

I battled through the now almost solid crowd that surrounded his news stand and aimed straight for him.

‘That’s the wrong information. Take that down now.’

Without skipping a beat, the dog turned to me with these enormous, dewy, round, puppy dog eyes and said. ‘Aww, please, just a little longer. I’ve never been so busy.’

I suddenly felt my knees go weak as I stared back into his deeply sincere, ocean blue gaze that was reaching in via my eyeballs and devouring my heart. ‘Aww,’ I began to say as I shrugged my shoulders and looked down at my feet. ‘Well, that’s alright.’

But suddenly it dawned on me. I raised my hand and slapped myself around the face. ‘No,’ I said. ‘No, they found cave drawings of a human body, not an actual human body. That’s enough of that. If you want me to shut your news stand down now I will.’

‘Aww, okay then,’ the dog said as he slunked over to the news board and turned it around to reveal a much less interesting story. As he did so he looked back at me, letting out a deep, lingering whine before slunking back over to his seat and slumping into it.

Almost immediately his news stand quietened.

‘Have a great day,’ the dog said with an upside-down mouth.

I continued on my way to work, watching with both hands over my mouth at the carnage that continued to unfold in the street at a thousand miles per hour. What had I done? Clearly, nobody was taking any notice of the fact that I had corrected them.

But then, approximately one hundred steps later, amongst fleeing animals and terrified screams, something in my mind clicked and I turned back around to face the news stand again.

As I did, a fleeing Fox smashed into me, knocking me to the ground and smashing my glasses. I scrambled to place my glasses on but they were cracked, and by the time I’d stood up I noticed something terrible. I let out a gasp, that damn dog was surrounded once more and once again he was flinging papers to the commuters with another huge smile across his face. He caught sight of my snarling face almost immediately, slid his body in front of the news board and then began sporadically coughing. ‘That dog is in so much trouble,’ I grumbled to myself. But just as I was about to step forward and give the dog another rollicking, something else dawned on me, I was late for the morning meeting.

A short while later, I gripped the brass handle of the story division door at Orb Central Library and peered through the window at the other longtails who were

rushing about.

Every morning the team leaders of each story division would gather to discuss the latest fake news and be assigned their stories.

As the leader of the newly formed diversity team, this was supposed to be a great day for me. My plan had been to create a crack-fake-news-fighter team using the other animals on planet Orb rather than the traditional route of teams made up of longtails. We were supposed to be a force to be reckoned with. Using my sharp skills and my team's knowledge of other animals we would fight fake news like no other team had ever done before.

But after yesterday's terrible first day with the new recruits, and now this fake news fiasco on my way to work, I could feel my knees knocking together at the thought of seeing all the other longtails.

However, I didn't have much more time to think as the door suddenly opened and in front of me stood Vince. 'Where have you been? We're on amber alert here. We've hit a seven on the panic scale. This is a disaster.'

'Sorry, I got caught up, that's all.'

On taking a seat at the morning briefing, I twiddled my fingers as Mr Sigvald, the Story Division Director, stood up to address everyone.

'Well, I'm sorry that you've had to wake up to this folks. What a morning. A panic scale seven. We've not had this in a while...'

Underneath the table, I crossed my fingers. Maybe, I thought to myself, just maybe, they weren't going to mention the cave drawings in the Madmin caves.

Mr Sigvald continued. 'So the cats have found some drawings of a human body in the Madmin Caves. So far, we've had several worrying — possibly fake — news reports in. First up, that there has been an actual human body found in the caves, causing widespread panic.'

I screamed silently to myself.

'Secondly, we actually descend from humans.' Mr Sigvald laughed. 'Which is absolutely ridiculous but, I suppose, we can't rule anything out.'

My arch-enemy, Vince, shot his arm into the air, 'Ready and able, Sir'.

I sat up straight. Whatever happened, I couldn't let Vince and his team get this assignment. If they found out it was me who started the rumour it would be the end of everything. I shot my hand in the air. 'Me too, Mr Sigvald. This, may I just say, Sir, would be a great assignment.'

Vince interjected. 'No way can he handle this.'

'Now, now, Vince. Let Denver speak.'

'Well, Sir, I said, gripping the edges of my waistcoat. 'I would just say that I think that there is no one better in this room to take on this challenge than myself and my new recruits...'

'New recruits,' Vince said. 'Is that what they are?'

The other team leaders let out a chuckle but Mr Sigvald stared at Vince with a face like thunder.

‘As I was saying. I would like to say that I have a cat on my team. Kitty Steven’s is her name...’

‘You mean the drop-out daughter of that celeb?’

‘Vince,’ Mr Sigvald said. ‘One more word and you won’t get any work at all. Understand?’

‘As I was saying. Kitty Steven’s will be well versed with cat whispers. I’m sure she will be able to get the cats to talk. I am almost positive we can do this, Sir. I know it’s a big challenge for my first assignment but I really think I can do this.’ I let out my sweetest smile and crossed my fingers under the table again.

‘Well, now.’ Mr Sigvald scratched his chin and paced the floor. ‘It is a big challenge. We’ve not had such a panic in a...’

‘Sir, this is nonsense,’ said Vince as he stood up. ‘That cat wouldn’t know hard work if it slapped her in the face and Denver here is totally inexperienced. I think...’

Mr Sigvald held up his hand to Vince whilst looking straight at me. ‘Then so be it. May the long-tail luck be with you, Denver.’

All of the other team leaders let out a sigh and began grumbling amongst themselves.

It was mine: all mine.

‘News report. News report coming in.’ A longtail scurried into the room and switched on the television. Everyone watched in silence as a Parrot in an ill-fitting bodycon and stilettos screamed into a microphone. ‘That’s right everyone. Breaking news.’

The Parrot fought to stay upright as animals smashed past her in panic, her multicoloured parrot feathers furiously flapping in the gale-force winds. She gripped her earpiece. ‘That’s right. I can confirm, there has been a human body found in the Madmin caves and I am currently standing on Maul Street where panic has gripped the nation.’

I sank into my chair as the Parrot continued.

‘So far, we’ve had reports from Orb Central Library that we’ve hit a panic scale 9 but we’re still waiting to confirm that. As you can see, terror has gripped the animals of Orb. Some say news has spread as far as the outer edges of Orb but we’re also waiting to confirm that too. Lets, let’s speak to some of the animals this terrible news has affected.’

The camera panned out and the Parrot looked around at the nearest animal she could find but they were all fleeing past her. On realizing nobody wanted to talk to her, she suddenly shot her arm out and rugby tackled a Swan, shoving the microphone into his mouth and demanding he tell everyone how he felt.’

The Swan screeched, ‘I have to get home and save my family. I have to go.’

The Parrot tightened her choke-hold. ‘Sir, please tell us how the news has affected you,’ she said, grinning back at the camera in an attempt to look utterly un-fazed.

‘Fine,’ said the Swan in an increasingly croaky voice, as he gasped for air. ‘There

could be more of them. We could all die. I think I'm going to...' Suddenly the Swan's eyes rolled to the back of his head and his head slipped through the Parrot's death-grip. The camera remained perfectly still, leaving only the Parrot with one empty arm in a choke hold position and the other with a microphone in hand. 'Well,' said the Parrot calmly as she rested her pose. 'As you can see this news has really taken its toll on the animals of Orb. Now then,' the Parrot said as she gripped her earpiece and scowled. 'Let's get one more interview,' she said with a pained giggle as she looked around at the fleeing animals.

Once more the camera panned out; however, this time, amidst screaming animals, she immediately spotted a cat who casually stood licking an ice-cream and checking her nails amongst the beldham that surrounded her.

'Mam, please tell us how this latest news has affected you?' said the Parrot, shoving the microphone past the cat's ice cream and into her mouth.

'Well it's not true, is it?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, this longtail...'

I sank into my seat.

The cat continued. 'Accidentally told everyone it was a human body not a drawing of a human body and sparked a panic. Idiot.'

'So you're telling the nation that this isn't true? What did the Longtail look like? Who was he or she?'

'Young lad, blue waistcoat, spectacles.'

'Anything else? Hair, hat, name?'

'No, nothing. Just a blue waistcoat, spectacles and brown trousers.'

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Vince eyeing my attire. 'Where're your spectacles, Denver? Don't you walk past Maul Street on your way to work?'

Everyone in the room turned to my direction.

'In my office, actually,' I said as I stood up and headed for the exit. 'I left them here last night.'

'Well then, don't mind if I come with you and check that do you?'

I let out a nervous giggle. 'Sure. Sure thing.'

'Vince, I'm sure there's no need for that,' said Mr Sigvald.

'Well then, Denver won't have a problem with me going then will he?'

Inside my office, most of the new recruits had already arrived. I slipped past them and from my desk I pulled out my spare set of spectacles and waved them in Vince's face. Vince said nothing, instead, he let out a small growl and walked out of the room, giving each and every one of the new recruits a bitter look as he passed.

'Well he's a breath of fresh air,' said Kitty Stevens after Vince had left.

I chose to ignore it. 'Now then,' I said to the new recruits. 'We have a panic scale 7 fake news story to investigate this morning and we need to solve it. As in, we really, really need to solve it. As in, I know this is a big job for you on your first day but...'

'You mean the human body in the Madmin caves?' said Kitty Stevens.

'Yes. In fact, you will be coming with me to investigate Kitty Stevens. The rest of you...'

Suddenly the door burst open and in walked Buck, rubbing his eyes. 'Sorry I'm late, me Mom's alarm never went off.' Buck slumped into a seat.

I felt my eye twitch and chose to ignore that too. 'The rest of you can stay here. I'm going to need you all to monitor the news reports and relay information back to Kitty Stevens and myself who will be first visiting the Madmin Caves.'

Coco Nibbles raised her hand. 'Can I go with you?'

'Sorry, you know what cat's are like. You being a rabbit and all. This one is just for me and Kitty Steven's.'

The Buffalo leant back in his chair. 'You know I heard it was a longtail who started that rumour on Maul Street. You don't think it could be someone who works here, do you?'

I let out a small giggle as I placed my spectacles on my face. I wasn't answering that one either.

'Now team, we will phone you once we have arrived at the caves. Now listen to me, everything is resting on this, the rest of the longtails are watching us closely. This is a big task for our first assignment but together, if we can work as a team, we can get this. We have 48 hours to crack this news report before I need to submit a news report with the board of Directors and...'

Coco Nibbles suddenly began stroking her ears in downward strokes, her eyes darting all over the room. 'This is actually stressful. 48 hours. 26 hours. What are we going to do? I didn't know this was so stressful. What if we can't do it? What if...'

I raised my head and studied the faces of the new recruits as I continued. All except Buck who had faceplanted the table and the Rhino who was staring at the ceiling. 'We are,' I raised my voice and began walking toward the door. 'Going to be the best fake news team to have ever lived. Mark my words.' I slowly pointed to all of them as they sat in total silence, not so much as a flinch of agreement passing their faces. Then, on seizing my perfect moment, I exited the room, slamming the door behind me.

In the hallway, I rested my face on the wall. What the hell was I going to do? This was all a terrible, terrible mess. When out of nowhere....

'Forgot someone?' It was Kitty Stevens. She leant on the wall next to me and casually checked her fingernails as she spoke.

I removed my face from the wall and rubbed my cheek.

‘Look, Denver,’ Kitty Stevens said as she looked me square in the face. ‘You seem like a nice Longtail and all that, and I can see how important this is to you but, you know, I, well, I’ve never been the best at anything — ever. Well, what I’m trying to say is I hope you don’t have too much riding on this. I mean, the rest of them in there too..I mean..seriously? A crack-fake-news-fighting-team? You seem lovely and all that but I just don’t think...’

As Kitty Steven’s spoke her voice seemed to muffle and swirl in my mind. Her words began to make no sense to me as over Kitty Steven’s shoulder I spotted a photograph of my Grandfather on the wall. He was beaming back at me in his finest spacesuit. There was nothing for it: I wasn’t giving up. I took a deep breath in, lifted my shiny nose as high as it would go and pointed one finger in the air as I stomped off down the corridor.

To the caves,’ I shouted, my voice ricocheting between walls.

THE MADMIN CAVES

As Kitty Stevens and I approached the Madmin Caves, a strong smell of burning incense drifted down the dirt path toward us.

‘Oh no, they’re here already,’ Kitty Stevens gasped.

‘Who?’

‘The Moggie Burners. They’re a bunch of spiritual cats. I could have guessed they’d be onto this. The minute there’s even a whiff of something they could even remotely worship, they descend like flies.’

Kitty Stevens was right, I’d heard about the “Moggie Burners”, as they would like to refer to themselves; however, it was only when the Madmin Caves came into full view that I fully appreciated what Kitty Stevens was talking about.

Strewn around the entrance to the caves, hundreds of partially naked cats, with only feathers, body beads and fluorescent paint to cover their modesty, gathered to lay homage to the recent discovery of a human drawing in the Madmin caves.

Kitty and I tiptoed carefully through the densely gathered moggies as we headed for the caves, our bodies squeezing past an outpouring of freedom and expression. We ducked to avoid flying fluorescent powder; sidestepped a number of makeshift shrines, legged it past preaching moggies, flat-out refused to comment on an alarming number of badly constructed art pieces and dodged a barrage of free hugs.

Finally, I staggered and panted as I burst from the crowd and into the entrance of the Madmin Caves, brushing coloured powder off my waistcoat and peeling endless daisy chains off me.

However, when I turned around I realized that Kitty Stevens was missing. I screamed for her as loud as I could but all I could see was a thick wall of Moggie Burners and flying face paints.

At first I heard nothing, just a blur of spiritual chants and positive affirmations, then, from amongst the chaos, Kitty Stevens burst through the crowd whilst letting off a highly out of place dying-cat-scream. I looked her up and down. She was covered in fluorescent paint and had twigs and daisy chains sticking out from all over her ragged fur. I’d never seen her looking so rough.

I could tell by her squinty eyes and snarling teeth that if I said a word about it she would kill me.

‘Soooooo... let’s find that nice cave drawing that we’re looking for.’

As we walked deeper into the cave, we found dark tunnels that were dimly lit by sparsely scattered fiery wooden staves, with craggy stone walls and ceilings that dripped with ancient stalactites. Eventually, we spotted a small group of cats in the distance and made our way over.

One of the cats, who had grey hair and a considerably large tummy tyre, spotted us immediately and stood up to make our acquaintance. He straightened his safari hat and wafted his binoculars away from his armpit. 'And here,' he said in a low tone to his other cat friends, "we have, from the shadows of the Madmin Caves, a lesser spotted longtail, of the longtail species. This elusive creature occupies the Northern Hemisphere of Planet Orb and can be trace—'

Both Kitty Stevens and I stood in complete silence whilst the Fuzz spent the next five minutes informing all of us about my ancestral heritage and my innate ability to adapt to the natural environment.

I felt it terribly rude to interrupt however Kitty Stevens could take no more. She rolled her eyes and butted straight in. 'Well, thank you for the introduction to Denver but we're trying to find out more about the cave drawing of a human.'

'Yes. Yes,' I said, 'I'm Denver Longtail and this is Kitty Stevens. We're from the Orb Central Library and we're trying to find out where the cave drawing of a human came from. You see, there's lots of fake news flying around about it so we need to find out the truth before any more wild stories emerge. Is it here, can I see it? I'm sorry, so rude, what's your name?'

'Names Fuzz. I'm an intrepid explorer, the last of the cat...'

Kitty Stevens rolled her eyes again. 'So, how did you first come across this drawing?'

I turned to face a stoic-faced Kitty Stevens. She was handling that intrepid cat explorer with balls of steel. If she hadn't been here, I quickly realized, I'd have spent all day trying to get a straight answer out of him.

'Well,' Fuzz continued, 'I was on a lone mission, amongst, the wilderness, one that would reach farther, much, much farther, than the edge of our great planet Orb. A dangerous mission tha—'

Kitty Stevens folded her arms. 'You mean you went out on your usual walking route and for some reason ended up in here.'

'It was a pack of teenage dogs, they chased me like wolves through the forest. I burst out from the bushes and I—'

'Okay. Okay. I get the picture. Now, where's that drawing?'

As Fuzz and his cat friends parted, Kitty Stevens and I gasped as the impressive cave drawing came into view. One of the cats hovered a flaming torch near it and the peach paint from the human skin glistened against the dark, dank walls of the cave.

'Fascinating,' I said whilst gripping my mouth. 'Is it real? Have you a date for it?'

One of Fuzz's cat friends piped up. 'It's two thousand years old and, yes, it's very real. Look at the way the stone has been chipped into. That's typical of a flint tool from that period.'

'Do you know who drew it?' Kitty Stevens said.

‘No idea. We’re not psychic,’ said Fuzz.

I threw my little hands in the air and turned to Kitty Stevens. ‘What are we going to do? We’re going to have to tell everyone that it’s a real cave drawing without knowing the truth about where it actually came from. That’s worse. Imagine the fake news when we say that. Everyone’s going to say it’s a human who drew a picture of himself that did it. And we can’t prove them wrong because we don’t know who drew it. Everyone is going to presume that we descend from humans if that news story flies around. The panic scale is going to fly up.’

‘At least there isn’t a real human body here. If that fake news was true, then there would be trouble.’

I gulped and looked to the floor.

‘Unless we get a second opinion?’ Kitty Stevens suddenly blurted out.

One of the cats stepped forward. ‘Look, if Fuzz here says it’s real then it’s real. There’s no one better than him.’

‘Dammit.’

Kitty Steven’s face lit up. ‘That’s it, a psychic. We could get a psychic down here and they can tell us who drew it.’

I rubbed my temples. Actually, that was actually a great idea. The animals of Orb were a sucker for a psychic. A psychic could find out which animal on Orb drew it and clear the whole thing up. ‘Right, now we need to stop off at Maul Street for more investigative work and then go back to the office so I can write up an official press release, letting everyone know that there one hundred percent isn’t a human body here. Then, we can come back here and meet a psychic a bit later on to prove that a historic animal drew the cave drawing.’

‘Phew, that sounds exhausting,’ Kitty Stevens said with a yawn.

‘Well, I’ve not trained the rest of the team to write press releases, so we’re going to have to go back to the Library before coming back here in case they mess it up. Plus, we really need to get to Maul Street.’

My mobile phone began ringing so I answered. ‘Hi, Boris... How’s everything in the office.... Asleep... Oh, just forget about him... What have we missed?... Vince, why?... Oh, no.... Okay... Okay.... No, we haven’t found a body so I’m coming back to write a press release about that. The cave drawing is real so the plan is to get a psychic up here... Okay.... Okay... See you soon.’

‘What did he say?’

‘The Buffalo, Byson Bucks, was in the toilet and overheard Vince say he thinks that I can’t pull this fake news story off and that he’s going to do some investigation himself.’ I paced the floor as I spoke.

‘So, what does that matter? We’ve already established there’s no human body here and we have a plan for the next part. There’s no way he’s one step ahead of us.’

‘I suppose.’

Deep down though, I knew that it was only a matter of time before Vince checked out

Maul Street and found that Dog on the news stand who I was sure would recognize me. I was going to need to get down to Maul Street as fast as possible.

As we closed in on the entrance to the cave, a loud din of chanting animals drifted down the tunnels toward us.

‘Can you hear that?’ said Kitty Stevens, ‘Sounds like they’re chanting “we sacrifice these animals to the human man-god in the name of peace and love”. What animals?’

But as we neared the entrance, it became very apparent who they meant. The entrance was completely blocked by Moggie Burners who were pointing straight at us. One of the Moggie Burners, who looked a bit like Jesus, stepped out from the crowd and pointed in our direction. He stroked his oversized cat beard and flicked his long, scraggly dark hair as he spoke. ‘Hear thee, hear thee. You have been chosen as our animal sacrifice to the human man-god, in the name of peace and love, tomorrow at sunset.’

‘I don’t think so,’ I said, slamming my little foot into the dusty cave floor.

‘Hear thee, hear thee. You have been chosen and will not pass.’

I could feel the anger bubbling inside of me. ‘Listen, Meowses, or whatever your name is. Let us past, we have work to do.’

Meowses squared up to me. ‘Listen, longtail, you’ve got no chance. There will be riots. They came here expecting love and peace and by christ, they’re gonna get it.’

‘How’s sacrificing us creating love and peace?’ Kitty Stevens said with arms wide open.

‘Because,’ Meowses said, in the most sarcastic tone he could muster. ‘We think sacrificing you to the human man-god will bring us peace and love.’

I gripped my fists together and snarled. This was the absolute last thing I needed. Not only did I have the issue of solving the fake news story before tomorrow at sunset, we were now also going to be sacrificed to the gods at the same time, and, worse than being sacrificed to the gods, all I could think about was Vince prowling around Maul Street.

As the hours passed, Kitty Stevens and I tried everything we could to escape but the Moggie Burners simply wouldn’t budge. Eventually, I slumped into the corner of the cave and got my mobile phone out of my pocket.

‘Hi Buck, you’re awake, it’s Denver. Will you put Boris on please.... Sure, you can go back to sleep.... Hi Boris. It’s Denver. Listen, I need you to keep what I’m about to tell you a total secret from the other longtails. So, me and Kitty Stevens are trapped in the Madmin Caves because the Burning Moggies want to sacrifice us to the gods... Tomorrow at sunset. Now, I need you to do two things. First, write a press release saying that we officially confirm that no human body exists, just a cave drawing, and

send that to the Daily Tail. Second, I need you to find a psychic and have them meet us in the Madmin Caves... Yes... Yes, that's right, they will probably be sacrificed to the gods too but they will be able to confirm where the drawing came from and hopefully, I don't know, tell us, like, a chicken drew it or something not a human being... No, no, whatever you do, don't tell them they are going to get sacrificed.... I will explain later, please just do it.'

On placing my mobile down, I looked up to see Kitty Stevens staring back at me with an extremely confused look across her face. 'And the reason you're not telling the other longtails, who could probably help us get out of here, is?'

'If they find out we're trapped in here they might take the fake news story off me.'

'And that would be a bad thing right now because?'

I slammed my face into my hands. 'Because it was me who accidentally started the fake news story of the real human being found in the caves on Maul Street.'

Kitty Stevens roared with laughter.

'It's not funny. If they find out I would lose my job. There's a dog on a news stand down on Maul Street. I'm sure he would recognize me. If Vince gets to him before I do, I'm toast.'

'Okay, calm down. I'm sure we can get down there.'

'Well, when this psychic arrives then we can tell the Burning Moggies that, I don't know, whatever the psychic says, like a chicken from the ice age drew it or something like that, then we can get down to Maul Street and solve this case.' I rubbed my temples. 'Oh, what have I done.'

Over the next few hours, I hovered over my mobile phone. Eventually, it rang and I jumped. 'Hello... What do you mean, tomorrow? Is there no one else... Oh for goodness sake... Yes, fine, speak to you then.' I slammed my phone back into my pocket and looked straight at Kitty Stevens.

'You won't believe it? Boris rang a hundred psychics and there was only one psychic who, out of all of them, said they could come to the Madmin Caves and help us. They either didn't answer, hung up on him, were on vacation, had quit the psychic business or died. Boris says there's an unusually high death rate amongst psychics and should we be doing this? And, more importantly, the only psychic available is only able to make it here tomorrow.'

'Oh no, a whole night in this grotty cave. Whatever happens, we need to avoid asking Fuzz any questions otherwise it's going to be a long night.'

'Agreed.' I slammed my hands into the dusty floor and swung my gaze to the ceiling as I rested back on the cave wall. 'No psychics available... what're the bloomin' chances?'

That night, I barely slept. Aside from the mind-numbing affirmations that kept drifting into the cave, my mind was churning. Boris had sworn to me that they managed to successfully submit a press release to the Daily Tail but I couldn't help but wonder. After all, I'd not yet given them any training. And Vince, what was he up to? Vince was so clever, it would surely not be long before he was investigating on Maul Street and found that damn dog.

It was late afternoon the following day by the time we saw the hand of a cow shoot out from the crowd of Moggie Burners, who were still blocking the cave. With long red hair that touched her knees, a bad piece of art in one hand and daisy chains covering her head to toe, the psychic cow that we had blindly hired squeezed the rest of her body through the crowd and stumbled toward us. There was no time for niceties, we simply grabbed her by the hand and dragged her to the cave drawing.

Kitty Stevens, myself, Fuzz and his other cat friends, all watched with bated breath as the psychic cow wafted her hands in front of the cave drawing. 'Many animals have walked these caves —'

'No, for God's sake, just tell us who drew that picture and why?'

The cow approached the cave drawing with huge eyes that never blinked and began rubbing her face into it. Behind her, all of us held our breath and all gripped one another as she muttered her next words.

'It was. I see. I see... a duck. It was a duck with big hands who drew this picture. He was psychic. A psychic duck with big hands.... he's here now, listening to us, watching.'

Fuzz screamed.

'That'll do,' I shouted. 'There's no time left, the sun is going to set soon.'

Each and every one of us then ran like the wind to the cave entrance.

At the entrance, the Moggie Burners were still chanting their twisted tune as they danced around outside the cave. We all came to a sharp stop at the entrance and I

shouted at the top of my lungs, sending the Burning Moggies chant into a low murmuring hum.

‘Moggie Burners of planet Orb, listen and listen to me well. For I have found out the truth—’

Suddenly my phone began to ring. ‘Sorry, one second, I just need to get this.’ I held the phone to my ear. ‘Yes... right... oh no... are you sure... no we’re fine, we’re just about to tell the Moggie Burners it was a psychic duck... till then.’

I looked over at Kitty Stevens, ‘Vince is heading to Maul Street. We need to be quick.’

Then I returned my gaze to the Moggie Burners. ‘We have the truth.’ My voice echoed through the cave behind us. ‘This psychic cow here knows the truth. She has told us that it was a duck with big hands who is psychic who drew the cave drawing of a human two thousand years ago. I hope you all feel very, very stupid.’

Meowses stepped forward. ‘So, you’re telling us, that the cave drawing was drawn by a psychic duck with big hands over two thousand years ago. So what you’re saying is that this psychic duck, two thousand years ago, looked into the future to when we first really discovered humans on Earth and drew one on that cave?’

‘Exactly.’

‘So there’s no real human just a drawing?’

‘Exactly.’

‘So we don’t need to sacrifice you all to the gods at sunset.’

‘Exact—’

The psychic cow let out a high pitched scream. ‘Whaaaaat!?! You we’re gonna to sacrifice us? We all nearly died. No one said anything about being sacrificed.’

Meowses scratched his head. ‘Hold on. If you were psychic, you’d have known that we were going to sacrifice you before you even came up here. How would you know if a psychic duck with big hands drew the cave drawing?’

‘I, em, well, I well, I’ve been rather sickly lately,’ said the not-so-psychic cow, whilst coughing and rubbing her arched over back.

‘I don’t believe it,’ I wailed.

Thinking fast, Fuzz began to talk in a slow monotonous tone. ‘And from the Madmin Caves a giant octopus nearly extinct—’

‘Good thinking, Fuzz,’ I said. ‘That’ll clear ‘em out.’

Then the crowds began to chant, ‘sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice...’.

Until this day, I still don’t know if it was the incessant chanting or the sound of Fuzz’s mind-crippling tone of voice, or maybe even both, but I turned around to see Kitty Stevens, the cat who put no effort in anything, foaming at the mouth and waving two sticks of wood with burning flames shooting from each end.

With a blood-curdling meow, she charged at the Moggie Burners.

I gasped in horror as I watched her wave her fire sticks so fast that she ended up looking like a crazy cat lady with one singular ring of burning flame hovering around her.

As she ran forward, the Burning Moggies parted like sliced butter, while the rest of us followed her slipstream and hurtled through the crowds behind her.

On the other side, I squeezed my body past the last of the Burning Moggies and stepped into the fresh air, closely followed by a fluorescent Fuzz and his friends. Immediately in front of me, leaning against a tree, and not with so much as a hair out of place, stood Kitty Stevens.

I literally jumped up and down with excitement. 'That was amazing. You were absolutely incredible,' I said to Kitty as she casually checked her nails.

Kitty Stevens simply shrugged her shoulders. 'Well, don't get used to it. Come on, Maul Street awaits.'

Fuzz shouted over to us. 'What about the not-so-psychic cow? She's still in there? I can't see her. She's not come out.'

Kitty Stevens and I both took one look at each other and then kept on walking.

Later on, back at the Orb Central Library, the new recruits were excited that we had returned and gathered around me in the office. 'We did the press release, you know, Denver. Take a look,' they all said.

'Thanks, guys.' I slumped into my seat and stared blankly at my computer.

'We all chipped in. All of us. We did a good job, right?' Boris said.

I looked up from my computer at a sea of delighted, expectant faces that were staring back at me. 'Right. Sorry, I will just check the press release now.'

I clicked a few buttons and the front page of the Daily Tail flashed up in front of my eyes. In prime position on the website, I read the headline of the press release that the team had released: "ORB CENTRAL LIBRARY CONFIRM THAT NO HUMAN LOBBY WAS FOUND IN THE MADMIN CAVES"

I looked back at their expected faces. *Did anything really matter at this point?* I thought to myself.

I sat up straight and forced a smile. 'Yes, well, that's a great effort, everybody. Well done.'

Whilst everyone else was giving each other a pat on the back for a job well done, I gripped the empty report form on my desk. Outside a sliver of red sun was setting in the sky, marking the final moments I had left to file my truth report at the Library. 'Look, everyone,' I said, 'please listen. Out at the caves. Well, it didn't go well.'

Coco Nibbles sat forward. 'What are you saying. You didn't solve it?'

‘No, I’m afraid that we didn’t find out who drew the cave drawing of a human body. Sorry, everyone. I really wanted our first assignment to go well.’

‘What human body?’ The old Rhino, Grandma Rocksteady, glared in my direction. ‘Did I miss something?’

Everyone moaned. ‘Oh, come on. The press release we’ve all been working on. The cave drawing of a human.’

‘You mean the pig?’

I slammed my hand into my face. ‘No, Grandma Rocksteady, the cave drawing of a human.’

‘I’ve not seen a picture of a human.’

Buck showed Grandma Rocksteady a picture of the cave drawing and she immediately said, ‘that’s a pig.’

I stood up and walked over. ‘Are you saying that’s a pig?’

‘Yes, I am telling you, that, my boy, that’s a pig.’

‘How do you know what a pig looks like naked?’

‘Well, back in the day—’

‘No,’ I shouted. ‘Stop. Do NOT tell us.’

Everyone in the room began to grip their mouths and tummies. ‘That’s disgusting. We’ve been looking at a naked pig the whole time.’

Grandma Rocksteady didn’t need to say any more. I grabbed the form from my desk and ran out of the door.

Mr Sigvald finished reading my report and placed it down on his desk. ‘Well, now. Your first assignment, Denver Longtail and you have gone and nailed it. A drawing of a naked pig all along. Who would have guessed that?’

I smiled sweetly. ‘All thanks to Kitty Stevens, of course. She was incredible.’

As I made my way to the door to leave, I felt as if I was walking on air. What a fabulous end to the day it had been.

‘Oh, Denver,’ Mr Sigvald said, just before I closed the door. ‘It’s funny, I don’t see anything about the Burning Moggies on your form. I’m surprised you didn’t bump into them. Any time there’s something even remotely worth worshipping they turn up. They once sacrificed me to the fly god when I was covering a fake news story about a two-hundred-year-old fly that had been preserved in ice.’

‘They sacrificed you. But you’re still alive?’

‘Ahh, yes, funny story, I thought they were going to kill me but all they did was look to the sky at sunset and chant “we sacrifice this longtail to the fly god”.’ Mr Sigvald laughed. ‘Thought I was a gonner, I did.’

That night, as I lay in bed and listened to my thirty-something brothers and sisters belt out a note-perfect rendition of West End Girls in their sleep, I mulled over the events of the last two days.

Aside from having to find a new route to work, as I owed a certain dog on a news stand a favour, I couldn’t help but think how impressed I was with Kitty Stevens. The cat who never put any effort into anything had really gone and saved the day. When I told the new recruits about how she saved the day they let out a huge cheer. I was sure, although not one hundred percent certain, that I could see a small smile from her face as the others celebrated her victory. I turned onto my side, fluffed up my pillow and closed my sleepy eyes firmly shut. What a truly magical day it had been.

Two seconds later a terrifying thought slammed into my mind as I shot to an upright position in bed and gripped my mouth — DOES THAT MEAN WE ALL DESCEND FROM PIGS?

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