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**Critical Element: Anthropomorphism, Humour and Technology in Children's  
Literature in the Age of Environmental Crisis**

**Creative Element: *Squirrels!***

Douglas Nelson

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of Creative Writing MPhil in the Faculty of English, January 2022.

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## **Abstract**

This inquiry examines the relationship between anthropomorphism, humour and technology in certain examples of animal writing for children, introducing my own creative work as part of the debate. In the age of environmental disaster, it maps some of the conversation around children's literature and anthropomorphism. This thesis explores whether it is possible to write animal characters in a responsible fashion given the shift away from seeing animals as 'other', to instead incorporating the recognition of the non-human as crucial in understanding, and thus saving, of the environment. I examine this shift in anthropomorphic writing, drawing on the work of Frans De Waal, ChenChen You and other advocates for anthropomorphism, arguing that it need not be seen as the antithesis to responsible writing for children. Though my title includes humour, this thesis does not attempt to analyse humour itself, but draws upon the work of Michael Branch and others who argue that silliness and humour hold an important place in children's literature. Furthering this, I argue that writing ought not to fall into the trap of codifying the genre too steeply or creating easy binaries, such as between responsible and irresponsible animal writing, lest it limit the possibilities of fantasy and turn readers away with overly didactic plots and predictable characters. I include a rereading of *Watership Down* as an ecocritical text, as well as examining other, more modern examples of anthropomorphic writing. Finally, I touch on my own work, and consider the challenges of writing in an age of ever-accelerating technological change. Following the critical dissertation is the creative work of 20168 words.

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# **Anthropomorphism, Humour and Technology in Children's Literature in the Age of Environmental Crisis**

## **Introduction**

This inquiry will examine the relationship between anthropomorphism, humour and technology in children's literature in the age of environmental crisis. Focusing on examples of children's writing in the context of the ascendancy of ecocriticism, it addresses a key question: in a time of ecological emergency, is it possible to write funny, apparently whimsical animal characters? There are, of course, many humourful children's books, and animal characters therein. It is then, now more important than ever to closely examine anthropomorphism and animal representation in light of the ethical situation in which all animals find themselves, outside of their own making. This question is especially important when placed in relation to the growing drive in ecocritical thought to see and represent non-human agency in our response to Anthropogenic climate change. In what follows, I will explore distinctions that have been made between 'mature' and 'immature' anthropomorphism, drawing on the work of Frans De Waal. I then turn to recent persuasive and insightful work by Chengcheng You, who argues for a 'middle-ground' between these oft-cited distinctions, advocating for the rhetorical shift away from seeing animals as metaphors for human knowledge, toward a more accurate, relevant form of anthropomorphism. While this critical approach is crucial, I argue that it need not be at the expense of humour. The desperate urgency of the climate crisis need not lead us away from playful anthropomorphism, which has a role to play in teaching empathy with animals.

This essay is divided into three parts. Firstly, I will examine the genealogy of environmental writing for children, including a critical discussion on technology and the pastoral, focusing on Richard Adams' *Watership Down*. In the second section, I will explore the debate surrounding anthropomorphism and the offered distinctions in the form, examining contemporary, popular texts that include a particular style of 'wild' anthropomorphism, following child characters and their close bond with animal companions.

I then consider other examples of animal writing, exploring how they too reach an ecocritical space in other ways, primarily through the use of humour. Finally, I will reflect briefly upon the difficulties I have faced in my own work writing about technology given the ever-accelerating pace of change therein. Whilst writing a story that sees animal characters using mobile technology, exploring how to write a plot that does not feel reactionary, or anti-modern and didactic, is of particular interest.

Caution is important when attempting to create an ethical framework for writing, lest it limit the possibilities of imagination and creativity in the genre. Welcoming such variety in animal representation may in fact offer a greater range and complexity to characters, and in turn, foster agency, rather than limit it. Critically assessing apparent spectrums or binaries, such as between mature and immature anthropomorphism, is crucial not just for the sake of animal characters, but for the wider movement of ecocriticism. All environmental literature must continue to appreciate the nuanced interplay between the instruments it chooses, be it imagination and pedagogy, advocacy and entertainment, joy and sadness. It is, as it always has been, in skilful and sensitive writing that the richness is found. That is why there remains room for courageous wolves, imaginary cats, and poetry-writing squirrels.

### **Part I: Where We Have Been: Environmental Writing for Children**

The roots of a distinct (English) children's literature are found in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in the context of industrialization and the accompanying laws that brought an end to child labour. Children had long been seen as 'miniature adults' by the grown-ups around them, but as their independence became gradually accepted during this time, works specifically for them began to emerge (Beales 1976: 379). Many early examples of literature were intended for the 'amusement and instruction' of children, following well-known publishers such as John Newberry who sought to publish works that fostered 'jolly' children and used riddles, poems, and prizes to engage young readers (Knuth 2012: 29). Newberry's positive attitude was not, however, the enduring influence of the time. Although industrialization was bringing positive shifts in the treatment of children, however slowly (the first enforced law relating to

child labour does not emerge until after 1800), the wider context of the time was one of great upheaval. Industrialisation brought class conflict, alongside an economic recession that followed expensive wars of empire, the American revolution (1775–1783), and the Napoleonic wars (1789–1815) (Knuth 2012: 30). In this context, ‘religious piety and the cultivation of reason’ rather than humour, were the ‘prudent responses to social chaos’ (Knuth 2012: 31).

Following the Evangelical leaders of education in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, reading was soon mandated as ‘a serious business’, intended for teaching children the ‘correct behaviour’, morality and proper acceptance of social position, and to ‘align their thinking to fit with society’s’ (Knuth 2012: 32). The preceding amusement thus shifted toward the well-known ‘cautionary tales’ that sought to ready children to become robust, capable, properly behaving adults. The result saw a new generation of writers that sought to instil explicit values in children, where amusement was seen as folly. The inevitable reaction to the Enlightenment philosophies of Hume and Rousseau was predictably alarmist: if children’s minds were indeed a ‘tabula rasa’ (2012: 29), or blank slate, then they were all too easily moulded to allow reading for amusement alone; consequently, ‘light-heartedness in children’s stories was out of place’ (2012: 31). It was then, a very gradual, long, and hard-fought battle to get to the point where encouraging creativity, empathy and imagination were credited as the most important part of reading. Caution is important when drawing comparisons between such different times, yet we can draw parallels here with the current concern that we must explicitly address the ‘serious business’ of the climate crisis in children’s literature.

The concern that environmental literature avoid the overly didactic is hardly new. Dr Seuss’s *The Lorax*, perhaps the earliest example of environmental activist writing for children, serves as an apt starting point here: after a war of attrition between the Lorax, worried for his beloved forest, and the Onceler, determined on its continuing development and destruction, the Lorax, now defeated, appeals finally to the reader to help save the day: ‘UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not’

(Seuss 1971: 34). Theodor Geisel was criticised for his apparently heavy-handed approach, and *The Lorax* labelled one of the first examples of overtly didactic 'eco-police' work (Marshall 1996: 1). Certainly, Geisel's intention is to highlight the greed and exploitation of modern capitalism which was in the process of a neoliberal transformation in the 1970s. His vitriol perhaps unsurprisingly showcased which side of the debate Seuss was on. Yet seeing greater depth in the story is important. Rather than a mere attack on business and growth per se, Seuss paints a gloomy picture if we decide that capitalism and caring for the planet cannot mutually exist. In the very beginning of the story, both protagonists are ruined; the now destitute Onceler will tell his tale only 'if you are willing to pay' (Seuss 1971: 7); the Lorax is nowhere to be seen. Seuss can hardly have imagined that readers would not argue that both were culpable, one for their greedy, another for their bossy and confrontational demeanour.

Both the Onceler and the Lorax have lessons to learn then: if we are to continue to grow and care, real dialogue between the tribes of greed and profit on the one side, and environmental protection on the other, are crucial (Hennesy, Kennedy and Chamberlain 2004: 128). These tribes were becoming ferociously evident in the environmental movement that was emerging at the time of *The Lorax's* publication, yet they endure today in public discourse on how best to tackle the climate crisis. Dialogue and middle-grounds are of course, not enough. But this complexity is now for us to answer, not the Lorax himself, and in this we find the true meaning of his warning that if none of us 'cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not' (Seuss 1971: 71). Though *The Lorax* would be an interesting case study, for the purposes of examining anthropomorphism I have chosen to focus on *Watership Down*, another seminal environmental text. Firstly, I will argue that placing the novel too heavily in the genre of the pastoral has led to a misunderstanding of the ecocritical credentials of the tale. I will then use Adam's style of anthropomorphism to examine distinctions of anthropomorphism that continue to be used in more modern fantasy works for children.



### Watership Down: A New Ecocritical Reading

*Watership Down* was first published in 1972, shortly after *The Lorax* in 1971. Both authors were writing in a similar time, in the context of a growing environmental movement. Undoubtedly, Adams' tale is more complex; the story has been rightly seen 'less as an attempted rendition of the life-world of rabbitry' than as an allegorical 'Tolkeinesque fantasy' using rabbits in place of humans in a traditional epic or saga (Buell 2014: 4). Christina Battista begins her insightful analysis of *Watership Down* by noting that ecocriticism is 'distinctly predicated on the need to give agency to the nonhuman world' (Battista 2012: 158). Adams, 'by giving voice, agency and reason to a group of rabbit protagonists', as well as their own myth, language and diverse personalities, 'inalterably gives agency to the earth' (Battista 2012: 159).

Yet other categorisations of *Watership Down* position it as antithetical to a modern environmental movement, in its reputation as a bucolic, pastoral tale. Rosemary Jackson labels such works examples of 'conservative fantasy', that, like *The Lord of the Rings*, speak to a desire to 'cease to be, a longing to transcend or escape the human' (Jackson 2003: 156). Such tales are heavily escapist, and given that in *Watership Down* the rabbits are seeking an Arcadia – a place that can be achieved only by getting as far away from humans as possible, on top of a secluded down – it would appear to fit within this framework. The scathing references to human activity in the novel also support this; when debating the cause of the destruction of their warren, they reflect: 'It was just because we were in their way. They killed us to suit themselves' (Adams 1971: 124). This thought is followed by a more philosophical prediction: 'Men will never rest till they've spoiled the earth and destroyed the animals' (119). This blunt generalisation can hardly be read as unreasonable, given the actions of the humans in the story. In this then, the reader is invited to question human progress itself, and ask if they too should go back to a simpler time; a 'Golden Age, a pretechnological era', in harmony with nature and the natural world (Pennington 1991: 69).

Rather than a modern, nuanced environmental message then, *Watership Down* can be read as supporting earlier tropes of environmental scholarship, where 'nature tended to be envisioned as a victim of modernization' yet simultaneously as 'its opposite and alternative' (Heise 2006: 508). In contrast, contemporary environmental writing 'sees nature as inextricably entwined with modernity' (508). Raymond Williams points out that this kind of binary, between country and city, is 'myth functioning as a memory' (1985: 44). Yet its influence can be seen on the early environmental movement, as shown in William Cronon's well-known critique of a modern Western obsession with 'wilderness'. By noting the wild as opposed to the urban, and a place to which we ought to return, Cronon notes that 'we thereby leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, honorable human place in nature might actually look like' (Cronon 1996: 11). Cronon argues that although 'we live in an urban-industrial civilization' (today 83% of the UK population live in urban areas), we 'pretend to ourselves that our real home is in the wilderness' and through this, 'give ourselves permission to evade responsibility for the lives we actually lead' (11). Does *Watership Down* really represent this kind of 'primitivist environmentalism' that craves a lost interconnectedness with the wild (Batty 2016: 27)? The notion that Adams was promoting anti-modernity seems to ignore the allegorical intentions of the tale. The plot speaks to the dangers of unchecked human technology, and is certainly pastoral in setting, yet an important message certainly for younger readers of *Watership Down*, one that seems somewhat overlooked, is not a call to escape, but a call to adapt.

Even in the apparently reactionary, safe, pastoral place the rabbits seek, they are not free from danger. The rabbits themselves know this to be true: 'you let yourself think that everything will be all right if you can only get to a certain place [...] But when you get there you find it's not that simple' (Adams 1971:126). When the rabbits do reach a suitable place to live, they must dig to build a warren. Traditionally, only female rabbits dig. Yet as the male rabbits of Hazel's band, the bucks, begin to question why, they learn the hollowness of traditional behaviour in the face of danger: 'I'm quite sure, myself, that if we don't change our natural ways, we shan't be able to stay here very long' (105). Finally, Hazel, despite being

shot by a farmer – a representation of the ‘old way’ of treating rabbits, and by extension, the natural world – is returned by the insistent, compassionate child Lucy, a representation of the future, and in a ‘Hrududu’ (a car), no less (359). This represents hope, of a new way, a world in which there is room for compassion toward animals despite, and alongside, technologies that have the potential to harm them. The conclusion of the tale speaks to encouraging a more complex understanding of the two sides – rabbits on the one, representing smaller, simpler worlds, and the humans that destroy their warren on the other, representing unchecked modernity, and wanton progress.

The new secluded warren is eventually destroyed, not by humans, but by the rabbit Woundwort. True, Woundwort is ‘not like a rabbit at all’, and has been made this way by seeing the death of his father at the hands of humans (Adams 1971: 76). Yet this does not imply that humans are the ultimate enemy. Instead, the reader is invited to question Woundwort’s uncompromising, paranoid methods of protecting his warren from humans by creating a fascistic regime with no animal allowed outside unless instructed. Though Hazel’s band of rabbits see the danger in humans, they also recognise the fact that this is no life for a rabbit at all. In the end, compromise is reached by the two battle-hardened warrens, who decide to coexist peacefully after the death of Woundwort and many others. It is a hard task to suggest that this denouement concerns only the fate of rabbits; so too the fate of humans rests upon this kind of compromise.

Compromise need not advocate a mere middle of the road. For a modern environmental movement, it means finding a way in which to live with technology, without destroying the natural world and the lives of the non-human. The denouement of the story serves to clearly contradict the rabbits’ earlier concerns that ‘humans will never stop until the world is spoiled’ (1971: 119). There are caring humans, and ways to live in happiness in their world. The reader is encouraged not to pick a side between the animals or the humans, as the rabbits do at first, but to recognise that animals and people must understand and appreciate one another in order to survive in the same world, of which they are both a part. If

the rabbits can do it, why can the humans not? In this way Geisel and Adams are similar: both show where humanity has come in creating these false binaries, and offer a direction that holds understanding, communication and adaptability up against tribalism.

Undoubtedly, *Watership Down* is not perfect, and contains problematic tropes for today's audiences. I echo Battista's reading of the novel, that as a critique of modern Western society, it is inadequate given its representation of the female (Battista 2012: 167). Interestingly, the popular adaptation for Netflix includes many central roles for female characters, changes in tone and language, and other alterations. The recent Audible release of *Wind in the Willows* (2020) follows this example, retelling the tale with all female characters. Such changes enhance both novels, for it is not possible to imagine an adequate moral allegory for the 21<sup>st</sup> century which does not include female protagonists.

While its representation of female experience renders the original *Watership Down* conservative and reactionary, it is nonetheless important to refute that the story represents a call to a pretechnological arcadia and a reaction against technology. More importantly, a novel should not be considered ecocritical in scope should it speak to this kind of simplicity. Undoubtedly, too great a reliance on technology and meliorism alone is unhelpful – yet so too is a call to return to an imagined original human state in nature. As I have suggested, an environmental movement and an ecocriticism adequate for facing the crises of our contemporary moment require greater nuance than this kind of simplicity.

#### Anthropomorphism: An Examination of Animal Characters in Children's Literature Today

Reimagining *Watership Down* might allow for a new ecocritical reading, but the question of anthropomorphism remains. The claim that by giving agency to animals we give agency to the earth, is not uncontested. The debate as to the ethics of attributing human characteristics to the non-human remains relevant and interesting. A useful starting point for understanding the debate is the primatologist Frans De Waal, who argues that a scientifically informed anthropomorphism is encouraged as the more 'mature' form, one that strives to offer 'the animal's perspective', whereas the less mature, 'humancentric' form

simply 'takes ours' (De Waal 2001: 77). The latter, for De Waal, has been 'aptly labelled' as an example of

'Bambification' (39). Chengcheng You, in her insightful article 'The Necessity of Anthropomorphism in Children's Literature' (2020) cites this reference, and its influence on a more recent scholar, Otto Oerlemans (2018), who cites Disney as an example where anthropomorphism 'becomes grotesque, an exploitation of both animal life and childhood imagination' (You 2020: 5). Such distinctions then, allow for certain types of anthropomorphism to be considered ethical, that where writing is informed by the scientific and behavioural study of animals, and enfolded into sensitively written prose. Yet herein lies an important question: how far has literature followed the science, and should it?

It is well documented that Adams uses *The Private Life of the Rabbit* as a background to his writing in order to lend scientific credence to his rabbit characters. Its author, R. M. Lockley, was suitably praised in a *New York Times* obituary for his 'rigorously factual work', without 'the anthropomorphic sentimentality that infused "Watership" with its charm' (Martin 2000: 3). Combining sentimentality and charm subtly criticises the anthropomorphism, reminding the reader of the necessary division between factual works and works of fantasy, and, further, reminding us that although *Watership Down* feels real, it ultimately is not. Intuitively, this feels reductive, but the context of the time provides a background as to why such distinctions felt sound. In the famous 1959 debate between C. P.

Snow and F. R. Leavis, the former insisted that there existed a 'gulf of mutual incomprehension between scientists and "literary intellectuals"', suggesting that the latter held power, while the sciences were underfunded, suffering from a lack of understanding in society (Gibson 2012: n.pag.). In response, Leavis denounced this notion, bemoaning the state of a public discourse which accepted such simplistic argumentation. This perception seems to have endured, despite the warnings of Leavis. The notion of science on the one side and literature on the other may have precipitated a move toward positioning literature as responsible for trying to meld the two more adequately, lest writing be disrespectful to the

truth. *Watership Down* can be understood in this light; a converging of the two worlds, an example of the kind of mature anthropomorphism that seeks ‘integration of anthropomorphic and “real” behaviour’ (Batty 2016: 16). Note the marks around ‘real’ – evidently, Batty is aware that few see the rabbits as real. Nonetheless, the attempt to at least try to get to the truth of rabbit behaviour by Adams is important. The reader certainly feels they know more about rabbits from reading *Watership Down*. And yet, do they?

Thomas Nagel’s essay ‘What Is it Like to Be a Bat?’ tackles this question. Nagel writes that ‘greater objectivity’ and a ‘less attached viewpoint’ – a more scientific approach to understanding the non-human – will not necessarily lead to understanding ‘the real nature’ of what it is like to be a bat (Nagel 1974: 445). Instead, our anthropomorphism is an example of ‘weakness for explanations of what is incomprehensible in terms suited for what is familiar’ (Nagel 1974: 435). Here, De Waal may point out that although we cannot truly understand the animal, it is nonetheless enriching to try, as in the case of *The Peregrine* (Baker 1967), for example. Although the speculation of the author as to the mindset of the bird makes him feel as though he is more bird, he knows he is not. Nonetheless, it is exactly in the realm of storytelling where we try to imagine what it is like to be one. The skill of the writer will tell in whether the reader will read along with him, and in that case, of course, they do.

That the reader will know any more truly about rabbits, or peregrines, or any other animal, does not appear to matter. As Maria Nickolejeva rightly states about animals’ ‘true’ motives, ‘The answer is, we do not know. But through fiction, and equipped with posthuman ways of reasoning, we may try to understand’ (Nickolejeva 2016: 7). The entire idea from Adams is a fantasy, a fantasy that is richer because the reader is spun into the idea of Lapine and of the rituals of rabbit behaviour that make the ensuing adventure all the more enticing. The point here is that Adams creates the fantasy that rabbits have a rich story of agency, with their own god, language, and rituals. He does not pretend to say that by reading this fantasy, readers will come to understand the mind of the rabbit better, for that is

not what the story is for. Instead, the creation of the imagined world has many potential outcomes, which all good literature should: that the reader begins to understand rabbits as agents and considers their own relationship to animals; that the reader goes on to question the very relationship between humanity and animals, and by extension the natural world; or that the reader merely loves the characters and is inspired to read more. The outcome that is not possible is that the reader ends up knowing the conscious mind of the rabbit. If nothing else, the reader is supposed to know more about themselves.

Does this then lead us back to anthropocentrism? That would seem to amount to strong and equally reductive essentialism; as Donna Haraway writes, the 'philosophical and literary conceit that [...] we have no access to what animals think and feel, is wrong' (Haraway 2008: 226). Simply because animals cannot be truly known by humans, it does not follow that we ought not to consider their lives at all, even in sensitively written fantasies and stories. To call even intricate anthropomorphism anthropocentric seems to support the somewhat naïve notion that all animals can only thrive if they are left entirely alone. This view, rather than speaking to the use of anthropomorphism, speaks more to the imagined idyll that Cronon chides, an attempt to avoid the world that humans actually inhabit, and the responsibility therein to represent other animals in constructive, positive ways.

This argument is, broadly, the conclusion reached by Chencheng You (2020). You argues that there is a 'middle-ground', that avoids seeing anthropomorphism only as sentimental folly, or as a commercialized exploitation of both animal and imagination. Instead, it is possible that anthropomorphism can 'connect the representation and material conditions of species life', using well-written, sensitive characters to draw together 'the insights of aesthetic imagination and ethical concerns' in the context of the global climate crisis (You 2020: 8). In this way, the debate shifts away from whether or not anthropomorphism is useful, and toward how it can be used to further the cause of an ethical approach to animal representation in literature and elsewhere. You argues that this kind of anthropomorphism can be found in what she terms 'the ethic of common

creatureliness', which aims to deconstruct the unwarranted 'interspecies boundary erected between the human and the non-human animal' (2020: 6). This familiar style uses a child protagonist meeting a wild animal who is seen as an equal with as much individuality, agency and value as the human in the story.

Through meeting this animal character and realising the complexity of their life, the child, and by extension the reader, learns that there is commonality to be found between species, thus questioning human arrogance and violence toward animals who share the same earth. You cites as an example *The One and Only Ivan*, an animal autobiography that, in similar ethos to Adams, conveys the agency of the animal protagonist Ivan by endowing him with an 'unmistakable individual voice' (2020: 9). Her other two examples, *Dog Boy* (Hornung 2009) and *The Midnight Zoo* (Hartnett 2011), create what You terms a 'contact zone' for animal and human characters. *Dog Boy* follows a stray child who lives amongst a pack of street dogs. This novel aims to show the fragility of the species boundary that has been constructed when the boy – based on a real person – is easily assimilated into the life of the dogs (You 2020: 13). *The Midnight Zoo* follows a group of children discovering the fantasy world of captive animals who are far beyond mere spectacles of human gaze, causing the children to question the human ethics and treatment of animals, eventually leading them to help free the zoo's inhabitants.

In both novels, the 'dichotomy between human self and animal other becomes irrelevant' when the children discover the true possibilities of animality (You: 3). In varying ways then, these tales use anthropomorphism in a positive form, beyond mere 'metaphors made flesh', to 'contest species boundaries, revisit the animal in us humans, and encourage a nature-friendly perspective' (You: 6). A close relationship between animal and human is not the only form of story that You advocates as possible within anthropomorphic writing; she notes that 'fairy tales, parables and wild animal stories' also have the power to 'comment on lurking human foibles in an ecocritical manner' (6). Presumably You did not



intentionally leave out humourful writing, but it is perfectly possible to imagine well-written animal stories that use humour in her criteria.

However, You does also mentions the need to include scientifically-backed anthropomorphism, arguing ‘for the realistic specificity of literary animals’ with ‘a certain degree of factual individuality’ attributed to them (2020: 11). Although this marks a positive rhetorical shift for anthropomorphism, to align this shift too closely with scientific knowledge may encounter its own ethical issues. Science amounts to much of the basis for human understanding of animals, but as F. R. Leavis suggested, science and literature are not two mutually opposed forces that need to be melded; they flow around one another in complex, nuanced ways. To align scientific knowledge and ethics too closely amounts to a misunderstanding of fantasy, where the limits are not so easy to prescribe. Children’s literature must properly reflect this, situating its approach to animality within the context and tone of the story, lest it be open to essentialisms and trope. This could have the adverse effect, reducing animals to their wild instincts and what is known about them from a behavioural standpoint. Rather than fostering agency, this has the potential instead to limit it, reinforcing the imagined species boundary with complex humans on the one hand, and instinctual animals on the other.

Marking a more detailed, factually accurate rendition of animality as the only ethical path forward also has ramifications for humourful writing. Many humour writers rely on a more ambiguous, absurd, or less detailed approach that is often associated with humour, but should not be necessarily demoted to a less important role in the genre. To illustrate this point, I will turn to two examples, *Wolf Brother* (2004), by Michelle Paver, and *Pax* (2016), by Sarah Pennypacker.

## **Part II: Where We Are Now: Anthropomorphism, Humour and the Anthropocene**

Based on the distinctions already discussed, both *Wolf Brother* and *Pax* can be considered examples of good, well-detailed anthropomorphism. These books present a shift toward consideration of the non-human, and by extension the environment, and are

examples of 'bridge' stories that attempt to see as much agency in the animal as possible. Both strive to reach this by giving a narrative voice to animal characters, create a contact zone between human and non-human, and accurately depict the animal. Anthony Pavlik notes that *The Forest* (capitalised throughout the book) is not a 'simple backdrop for the playing out of the plot', but a living breathing entity that is open to destruction, and must be valued and protected (2012: 27). This method of writing is used to 'advance the idea of nature as a subject in its own right', allowing the reader to see nature itself as a character (Pavlik 2012: 28). Pavlik also notes that the narrative method promotes agency in the way that Paver switches between 'focalizing through human eyes' and focalizing 'from Wolf's perspective' (Pavlik 2012: 30). This offers agency to animality in the text by seeing individuality and agency in Wolf, beyond his relationship with the human alone.

Though 'talking animals' may lead to criticism of the text, Pavlik levels this against Paver's meticulous research into wolf behaviour at the UK Wolf Conservation Trust, 'just one part of her extensive research for the series' (Pavlik 2012: 30). This observation of wolves renders the book 'not a case of cute anthropomorphism', but instead allows for a 'heightened empathy with Wolf' (Pavlik 2012: 30). Similarly, Pennypacker, the author of *Pax*, has spoken to the need to pay proper attention to the animal she is writing, noting that 'the more I learned about foxes, the more respectful of them I became [...] that respect led me to render them as naturalistically as possible' (Sutton, 2016: n.pag.). Both writers then, while very different, anchor their ethical credentials for using anthropomorphism in this research and observation, supporting the ecocritical notion that 'connections are made by living close to nature and by meticulously observing it' (Pavlik 2012: 30). This kind of wild anthropomorphism sits within the above-mentioned 'ethic of common creatureliness'. The 'connection between human and non-human is perhaps best seen [...] between Torak and his wolf companion' (ibid 2012: 29). Certainly, Wolf is provided agency in his complexity – he is often conflicted between his instincts and emotions, his desire to join the pack and his love for the boy. Both authors attempt to ameliorate what would be ethical concerns in their

plot by keeping a close tie to realism; familiar characteristics – such as smell, hearing and instinct – still rule the animal; in *Wolf Brother*, Wolf's language is limited, his human companion called 'Tall-tailless', the river 'Big Wet'. In *Pax*, the fox's voice is narrated through familiar instincts, a keen sense of smell and hearing, for example.

Although this depiction of the animal is relevant to both tales, it is important that writers tread carefully when relying heavily on knowledge, natural behaviour, and instinct in animals. Attempting to give greater respect to animals is crucial for ecocriticism, yet concluding that animal characters ought to be as close as possible to their behavioural profile seems reductive. This allows space for a rendition of animality that circles back to a melding of imagination and science; literary animals depicted largely as instinctual beasts, with some fantastic elements tacked on. This allows for a one-dimensional depiction of animality that relies on clichéd biological essentialism, as opposed to an enriched, curious representation. Were Kate Applegate's Ivan only given the language of instinct, for example, grunting as an ape does, it would have impacted upon the intention to see Ivan as an agent on equal ethical ground to the human characters in the tale. It could be argued that the reader will be lost if elements of the fiction are too fantastical, or in the wrong place. Yet to encourage young readers to read with incredulity anything that does not align with a 'correct' rendition of the animal they are reading feels intuitively unhelpful for creative literature.

What is more, when writing about instinct, writers are prone to errors. Even when discussing the issue of false anthropocentric anthropomorphism, they make mistakes: in a recent article, Maria Nickolejeva bemoans the depiction of the smiling ape Curious George as a 'very happy monkey', when 'In fact, animals do not smile; when monkeys bare their teeth, it is a sign of aggression' (Nocklejeva 2016: 6). Yet this is not always the case and varies amongst species, where instead, it is 'a signal of submission, or rank recognition' (Parr 2006). The point here is not to argue against researching the animal, nor nihilistically avoiding representation because there remains much to be learned. Instead, writing must resist a scientifically literal imagination of animality as the only feasible representation.

Animality cannot be reduced so easily if we are to accept that human and non-human complexity is part of the same ethical question, or that so much remains to be learned. If writers are to see the full agency of the non-human, then should representation not employ just as limitless a range of imaginative creativity as is available to their human characters, which is almost infinite? This does not mean a lazy computing of human thought onto animal characters. Rather, as Donna Haraway argues, true progress toward seeing animals as humans, humans as animals, might only be made when we are 'disarmed of the fantasy of climbing into heads, one's own or others', to get the full story from the inside (Haraway 2007: 226).

Aligning the ethics of animal writing too closely with scientific knowledge in this way could also render meticulous, highly detailed, and plot heavy writing the more acceptable for environmental literature. Examples of more serious, dystopian works for children (*Floodlands*, depicting an apocalyptic under-water United Kingdom, and *Breathe*, in which humans are forced to live on a limited supply of oxygen, to name but two) often feature a hardy protagonist, and arguably fall into the child "eco-hero" narrative' in children's literature (Pavlik 2012: 31). Such novels place a heavy burden on young protagonists and their responsibility to foster change. Such stories may well be offering children a stake in the solution, to which they are certainly entitled. Nonetheless, parallels can be drawn again with 19<sup>th</sup> literature, and the obsession with courage and bravery, intended to instil particular values in readers, particularly young men. The scout movement behind Robert Baden Powell serves as a historical example. Scout publications asserted that 'outdoor living counteracted the toxic effects of urban life', with Powell himself calling the movement 'a "character factory" [...] grounded in an ideology that demanded certain kinds of behaviour' (Knuth 2012: 84). Powell's movement functioned 'without any acknowledgment of the systemic poverty or unhealthy and dehumanizing social conditions' that shaped the youth he sought to help (Knuth 2012: 84). Similarly, placing too much weight on the individual action, ignores larger,

complex factors which may not be within reach for children. Children's literature has scarcely avoided taking a position, of course, never publishing books 'where bullies win, for instance' (Barkham 2020: 8). It should continue to advocate for children's agency, but it must reflect the complex picture of the time, and not promote only the brave, knowledgeable, hardy child character and their adventures to save the world. This tentative warning is not intended to discredit the genre of adventure or dystopia for children. Instead, it supports variety in the genre that properly situates the complex ethics of the age, in representatively complex narrative, character, and plot.

This is important not just for freedom in writing anthropomorphic characters of great variety, but for the sake of humour in writing. Humour's role remains important both in engaging readers and in teaching; that writers like Morris Gleitzman and Cressida Cowell populate the genre is testament to this. While literature must be careful not to advocate for mere attention-grabbing, humour should not be deemed as opposite to environmental studies, lest it be associated as the new boring subject for children. This risks reinforcing 'the unhappy stereotype of the environmentalist as solemn, didactic, or smug', thus turning their readership away from, rather than toward, the subject (2018: 14). Michael Branch, in his essay 'A Modest Proposal for Humour' (2018), questions the apparent lack of humour in the genre of environmental literature. Whilst pointing out that humour should not be held as a panacea, Branch argues that nature writers have wrongly been 'defined by the circumscribed conventions of a genre and the preconceived expectations of its readers', leading to an avoidance or underuse of humour writing (2018: 3). The parameters of a more realistic anthropomorphic writing that I have explore above, may be considered an example of such 'circumscribed conventions' which support a more serious form of animal writing, a style that for ecocriticism, may have 'begun to ossify', limiting writers' 'power to surprise the reader or provoke change in the reader's assumptions or attitudes' (Branch 2018: 10).

A more scientifically accurate style of writing is not necessarily more boring, of course, but it may arguably be at odds with a humorous form of anthropomorphism that

relies on the absurdity of a talking frog for example, within an incongruity theory of humour that views laughter as 'a response to the gap between expectation and reality' (Branch 2018:

11). Such humourful animal tales create a contact zone for better interspecies understanding, without necessarily depicting an accurate animal in scientific terms. Instead, the animal and human characters are brought into the same moral community through humour. For example, Morris Gleitzman's *Toad Rage* explores the relationship between Australians and their most infamous and targeted pest, the cane toad. It follows the misadventures of two cane toads on a mission to change the perception of their species as ugly and superfluous, whilst simultaneously hoping to better understand the equally mistrusted humans, who tend to squash them (Gleitzman 2004). Gleitzman depicts the toads as authors of their own destiny and as agents in their own right; one toad falls in love with a backpack and stars in a cooking show, while other animal characters are similarly assertive: a dog holds a role as a busy production assistant; a flea suffers with a stress induced ulcer. Another contemporary example is *Crenshaw* by Katherine Applegate. The character of Crenshaw is an imaginary cat who loves baths. His existence, and arguably by extension his agency, is imagined – he is only ever conjured up in times of stress for Jackson, the young protagonist, who, along with his family, faces imminent homelessness. Though there are attempts to render Crenshaw as cat-like as necessary – his tongue 'covered with little prickles, like pink Velcro' – this cat is certainly not rendered as naturalistically as possible; as Jackson notes 'he has fingers [...] Cats do not have fingers' (Applegate 2015: 64). He also wears a bathrobe and enjoys eating purple jelly beans.

Despite the relative lack of scientific imagination then, the animals remain unequivocally animal. It is the author's skill and humour that allows the suspension of disbelief to hold when imagining a dog working in television, or a cat soaking in bubbles. Nonetheless, this hardly renders either arrogant or anthropocentric representations. In fact, this seems to add to the sense of the animals' agency, for they are as complex an animal as

the humans, in their own peculiar, amusing way. Their agency is thus fulfilled, for the absurdity of this imagined world of the toads is the same as the absurd world of humans; they are capable of falling in love, having jobs, their own language, habits and wishes. It is possible to imagine a scientifically inaccurate animal as part of our moral community precisely *because* of his absurdity and individuality, the very fact that he doesn't quite make sense or fit into a preconceived view. This marks them quite apart from the pack animal that is ruled by instinct. Nonetheless, they remain real. This approach, far from being criticised for overattributing emotionality and intentionality to animals', ought to remain useful in generating 'a more empathetic understanding of animal life' (You 2020: 10). This goal surely remains important where widespread abuse and violence toward animals continues.

Looking further back, Roald Dahl's *Fantastic Mr. Fox* and A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* perform similar functions. Both authors employ a style of anthropomorphism that at first, feels intuitively like anthropocentric anthropomorphism. The characters of The Hundred-Acre Wood are in fact toys come to life, holding little to no similarities to the 'real' animals beyond what are now somewhat tired cliches, such as a fidgety rabbit or a morose donkey. Similarly, Dahl is loose with his anthropomorphism in *Fantastic Mr Fox*; foxes do not dig to the depths depicted in the tale, and it is doubtful that Dahl did a great deal scientific fox observation. Yet is the almost limitless agency offered to Pooh and to Mr Fox irresponsible? Arguably, it is no less respectful than rendering an animal a sum of its parts, ruled by instincts that are only interrupted by a fleeting interaction with a human. Then there is, of course, the humour. Children do not expect the fox to act in the way he does, and they find joy in that possibility. Much of Dahl's writing feels somewhat out-dated today, yet the residual popularity of the book speaks to the usefulness of the style of anthropomorphism in teaching children empathy with animals, which remains a crucial part of teaching children about their natural world. The often absurd humour in the book helps to highlight the absurdity of the treatment of foxes that continues in rural Britain today.

Fostering this kind of empathy and understanding, particularly in younger readers, remains crucial. When we consider that keeping children engaged with *reading itself* is important for empathy and understanding, this becomes a crucial warning for environmental writing. Quite apart from being aware of the right and wrong messages they ought to be learning, the results of reading may be most felt 'when the reader has been least conscious of anything other than "aesthetic" involvement', that is, reading for the sake of reading (You 2020: 11) Dahl and Milne wrote stories intended to be read aloud, often by their parents or teachers. Some of the dry wit may even be less obvious to younger readers than the immediate slapstick elements in the books. The humour serves many functions then; not only as a useful introduction to reading for pleasure, but also as an intentionally disarming feature that forces children to consider what to take, and not take, from reading the stories. For example, a bully might say something that amuses the child reading it at first, yet they are not being taught to empathise with the bully, but the very opposite. In this, they navigate the right and the wrong, the real and the fantasy, via the absurd and amusing.

These animal characters – and by extension, the children reading them – often also get it wrong, but in most stories for children, everything turns out okay in the end; 'whatever happens to them on the way, in that enchanted place on the top of the Forest, a little boy and his Bear will always be playing' (Milne 1992: 188). This apparent simplicity need not lead literature back to Rousseau's innocence of childhood, nor ignore the seriousness of the issue. As George Orwell famously reminds us, 'Every joke is a tiny revolution' (Branch 2018: 11). As You also points out, children's reception of storytelling is 'hardly predictable' (2020: 7), and even a talking teddy bear removed entirely from the scientific imagination can move literature to a more ecocritical place. What is more, there are clear ecocritical messages running through Milne's beloved classic, despite its apparent bucolic simplicity. Liam Henegan cites a renewed attention to the importance of place as a key tenant of ecocriticism, and suggests that 'Childhood might be the time when connection with place is fiercest' (2018: n.pag.). Milne's stories capture this affinity with place perfectly, sending all



those who read them back into their own hundred-acre wood, wherever it may be. This need to foster a connection with the materiality of nature is important for childhood, with growing evidence that 'access to outdoor experiences is vital for children's physical and mental health' (2018: n.pag.).

Such attention to place should, of course, be wary the risk of fetishization. Much of the supporting evidence of 'Nature Deficit Disorder' seems flimsy and somewhat alarmist, and environmental literature should be wary of unnecessarily attaching itself to such 'scientific' theory that again, leads us back to our imagined world, in which children were free to roam the forests, connected to nature instead of their screens. Henegan suggests caution with the relatively new psychological studies concerning place, nonetheless making the somewhat grand claim that such studies 'ask whether we have genetic predispositions to certain landscapes' (2018: n.pag.). While all parents may wish their children to experience the joy of being immersed in nature, stories that over-emphasise the affinity with place risk appealing to those that can experience this kind of immersion, and support the notion that children must retreat into the woods of a bygone era – an era that, as explored, has scarcely ever existed.

Beyond the charm of place, the exaggerated humour evidently plays a role in readers' affinity with Pooh, as well as the comfortable story formats. For the sake of arguing for the role of humourful writing, it is important that the simplicity in the writing not be given as evidence of a lack of advocacy or moral position, and by extension the only reason for the success of the stories. This is important beyond children's fiction, where apparently laissez-faire humour has all too often been held up to admonish the racism found in oft-celebrated humourists, for example, in Evelyn Waugh and P. G. Wodehouse (Chrisafis 2003: n.pag.). Instead, it is crucial to recognise that Milne is of course advocating for many things; play, friendship, forgiveness. There are plenty of moral messages, some relevant for today, some not, hidden behind the dry wit and satirical humour. Pooh's enduring place in the bookshelves of today's children speaks to the space for humour as far from simplistic

despite a less detailed approach to writing for children. For that reason, Henegan's analysis of *Winnie the Pooh* is useful and sincere, though the 'revolutionary tools' that he inspires, 'walking and listening, listening and walking' (Henegan 2018) should perhaps be aided by Paul Klee's discussion of painting, as 'moving freely, without goal. A walk for a walk's sake' (Klee 1925: n.pag.). For children's literature, one might wish to add to this list 'playing and laughing, laughing and playing'.

The risk of attaching too much importance to one aspect of children's writing, or writing at all, is to limit the imaginative space of the craft. This codifying, however apt or noble, supports viewing the debate within the framework of clear-cut, simple binaries. This belies the complexity of writing and the varied reader reception. Such generalisations ought to be avoided, ones that imagine apparent activists on the one hand, with serious messages, and 'good literature', with more nuance, complexity, and depth on the other. I argue for humourful writing, but for it being placed at the latter end of this imagined spectrum with respect to environmental writing for children, for in doing so I am in fact forced to enter the debate in this way. It is important instead to resist such frameworks, and dispel the myth that we must choose between things. Instead, the hope is that the genre continues to push the boundaries of what is possible for the imagination. For my own work that deals with technology and the environment, this has been challenging.

### **Part III: My Writing: What of Technology?**

Researching the interplay between anthropomorphism, humour and advocacy has helped me create what I hope is a humble, amusing piece of writing for children. The challenge has been writing a tale that deals with contemporary technology without appealing to simple reductions such as anti-modernity or technology. The humour, I hope, allows the subject to come out easily and lyrically in the plot without 'either being overdidactic [...] running the risk of being incomprehensible, or even misinterpreted' (Nickolejava 2016 :11) – and, without offering a simple middle of the road moral allegory. This question feels

especially challenging with respect to mobile technology. Arguably, modern industrialization 'separates us from the process of production' in the technologies that are used in its creation, inviting us to ignore the processes involved and encounter our environment 'as a finished commodity' (Harvey 1996: 302). It is ever more important then to consider these technologies that, for us, are now a simple fact of life. Is it possible to engage a young reader in questions of the ethics of mobile technology, when many of them take it in their stride in a way that amazes older generations? Today, children as young as 7 have independent, regular access to mobile phones, and use them more easily than many adults (Barkham 2020: n.pag.). The debate as to whether we can, or should, live without phones, is defunct, for those children at least.

My own story follows the life of a family of grey squirrels who move into an idyllic garden to escape the noise and danger of the parks, but soon find persecution there too. They are not wanted by the 'native' songbirds and are under threat from the new gadget-loving neighbour, who has discovered a secret: animals use lost or discarded mobile phones. He plans to use this fact to trap all the wildlife in the area and convince the council that the land is barren, and thus suitable to sell to developers.

It was crucial for me that this obvious moral allegory is not intended as anti-technology. In achieving that, as well as maintaining a humorous tone for children, I have pared back the writing a great deal. The length and scope of this essay means I am unable to include earlier drafts, but when I began to write this tale, I was perhaps being drawn into trying to write a more immersive, 'deep' fantasy, closer to *Duncton Wood* (1980) or *Watership Down*. Undoubtedly this attempt was bound to fail, not least because the scope of both of those novels is certainly beyond my skill as a new writer, but also that this was not the intention of this book. The core of this thesis is about space for all types of animal writing, from the immersive fantasy to the lighter, humourful, adventurous work. In trying to deal with *how* animals would use technology, I felt myself over-writing the plot and detail of how the phones worked in the tale, which began to feel boring for an audience already

technology-literate. Instead, I found that it was important to convey the technology as a simple fact of life – not described in detail, overlooking some practicalities and relying on suspension of disbelief, such as how a squirrel uses a mobile phone. In doing so I turned more toward a short, adventurous plot that focuses not on animals overcoming the use of phones themselves, but on how technology changes their world, and how they must navigate that change.

The use of anthropomorphism then not only allowed the narrative license to heighten the change that the phone brings, where a plot about children and phones may lean too heavily toward the didactic. Instead, the animals in the tale are not mere metaphors, but agents, with lives that are interrupted by human technology that is already, in a very real way, impacting their lives. Squirrels may not use mobile phones, but the ability to trap them and exterminate them - as well as other animals - undoubtedly relies on technology, and the ability to capture and kill greater numbers more efficiently will undoubtedly continue apace. In a similar vein to the writers I have relied on in this essay, I aim to give these animals an individual voice, and in turn, the agency they deserve. In doing so I do not advocate that technology is the problem, nor the only solution. Rather, as with all technologies that have transformed life, we must remember that they have not only transformed human life.

Further, the tale does not attempt to create a binary between using phones and not using them; the ending, in which there is no suggestion that the animals have stopped using phones, speaks to this. In doing so, I attempt to move away from supporting a familiar, clear cut moral allegory along the lines of 'children need to be outside more and on screen less'. We are currently in the early stages of understanding the technology we are using, and with automation and artificial intelligence becoming a fact of life, the voice of ecocriticism must continue to add a nuanced voice to the debate, and not move toward reductive rules and soundbites. Following this, my intention was not to use animals as an allegory to suggest that screens have changed the very nature of humans, though perhaps they have. Instead, the absurdity and humour in the plot is intended to highlight the often absurd ways in which

humans relate to technologies that are intended to enhance life or make it easier. These issues may reflect larger problems in our society with respect to our relationship to the things we consume, and to each other. Whether or not the abstract notion of the animals' 'true nature' – and therefore human nature – is somehow under threat is of no concern to this story. In the end, of course, it is how the animal community in the tale deals with technology, and how we must in ours, that is important.

It is also a tale about belonging. I have intentionally used the grey squirrel instead of the red, though the latter is under threat where the former is not. The grey squirrel is deemed a 'pest' in the UK today, one that is barely an agent beyond mere numbers. Very often, the fact that the grey squirrel migrated to these shores from the USA is held up as ample reason for its extermination. This accepted notion of native vs. foreign in the 'animal' kingdom is an interesting and often troubling ethical question, one that I hoped to highlight in the minds of readers. I grew up in the garden described in the book, and around adults referring to garden animals as 'pests', something, along with a host of other creatures – rabbits, foxes, badgers, deer, moles – that were to be managed, and kept away from a garden if it were to be at all successful. The grey squirrel is often categorised as an 'invasive species' and its status as a non-native animal to UK is held up as a reason for its widespread extermination.

This categorisation brings with it difficult ethical questions that are of interest, including whether the grey squirrel belongs, and whether it is right that humans manage their species in this way. This may lead to interesting conversations for young readers and adults, offering not only the beginnings of teaching around animal rights and conservation but also language and categorisation in the world beyond the garden. The kind of language used for unwanted animals has also been deployed to discuss the movement of people, particularly in the run-up to the referendum for the UK's membership in the European Union. In Chapter 2, during the meeting of the birds, I included language taken directly from speeches made by political figures to describe the movement of migrants and asylum

seekers to the UK. Highlighting the absurd alarmism displayed by the birds when they learn of the potential 'invasion' of grey squirrels is intended to be amusing for the young reader. The intention here is to highlight the assumptions and contradictions that are often inherent in this kind of discourse. This is not intended as a straightforward metaphor - the management of grey squirrels is of course not the same as the management of the migration of humans. Rather, I aimed to highlight the insufficiency and the dangers of categorizing logics. As an ecocritical approach disassembles the binaries erected between humans and animals, and between nature and technology, it can open space for a wider consideration of how otherness is constructed in language and how it is responded to.

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**Creative Element: Squirrels!**

### **Chapter 1: Going Against Your Nature.**

Kit scratched sulkily into the wall of the den. She wanted to see if she could stop Pa getting the deposit back, so they would have to stay. She stared down at the milling people below, folding away blankets and retrieving their wayward children.

'Squirrels *move!*' Pa cried as he scurried into the opening. 'And *don't* do that. I'll never get the deposit back.' He wagged his paw in his usual way and began his usual speech.

'You can't –'

'Go-Against-Your-Nature,' Kit interrupted. 'Yeah, I know.'

Pa nodded firmly and scurried across the dusty opening. Kit continued digging with one paw behind her back.

Pa was always talking about their Nature. Kit didn't feel like it was natural to move every three weeks; three weeks was hardly enough to do anything, let alone find any friends.

'Anyway, it'll be different this time!' he continued, carefully checking the spare plugs and cables.

It wouldn't, thought Kit. It would be a similar sort of tree in a very similar sort of park. She looked again through the hole at the rows and rows of boring, spindly pines. She was hardly even allowed to climb those nowadays. Pa said it was 'too dangerous', although Kit secretly thought this was just an excuse to spend more time inside.

'And I know, you love the park,' he said obliviously, 'well, this is *better*.'

'Abandoned animal testing centre, old sewer pipe?' said Kit, under her breath.

Pa, looking pleased with himself, held out his paws: 'A *garden*.'

He waited triumphantly.

Kit stopped trying to dig her way through the wall of the tree. She sat up on her haunches and squinted at him suspiciously.

'A garden?'

Pa nodded.  
'For real?'

Pa nodded again.

Kit had been born in a garden. She was too young to remember it, and when Ma was taken, they had moved. They couldn't be sure what had taken her - a fox, or a badger, maybe. More than likely it had been the gardener. People will do just about anything to get rid of squirrels: trap, shoot, blow up, poison. In the end Kit and Pa joined the others and moved to the parks. Humans were loud and annoying in the parks, but they didn't usually have guns.

Yet tonight, on his usual check of the tree, Pa had seen two brand new traps wedged into the branches, loosely covered with leaves. That had settled it. Kit was shaken awake, and they were getting ready to leave the next day.

'They call those traps *humane!*' chuckled Pa as he packed. 'Story goes that they trap you, then just *release you,*' he fluttered his paws outwards like a newly born butterfly, then suddenly 'BAM!' Kit jumped as Pa clapped his paws together. 'They take the trap, dip it into the river, and wait until the bubbles stop.'

'Thanks for that.'

'I'm just saying, you –'

'Never-Can-Be-Too-Careful, I know, I heard you the fourth time.' Then she considered. 'But wait, why are gardens safe now?'

'Ah, now, that's the best bit. There's an old lady who lives there,' Pa chuckled incredulously again, 'she just *leaves* food out, for the birds. Not just a bit of grub. *Tonnes of nuts and seeds!*' he thrust his paws out wide, 'plenty for everyone!'

Kit frowned. It all sounded a bit too good to be true.

'And this lady... she doesn't mind *squirrels* eating these bird nuts?'

Pa groaned and stretched.

'All this talk of moving has me exhausted!' he yawned, wrapping the charger cable around his shoulder and heaving it into the box, ready for tomorrow.

'And there's Wi-Fi, where we're going?' asked Kit, watching him count the spare cables again and make sure the portable charger was fully topped up. He pressed the screen propped up against the far wall of the den, and the small room filled with the usual soft, white light.

'Oh, course there's *Wi-Fi*, everyone has Wi-Fi. The old lady hasn't even put a *password* in!' Pa chuckled again and shook his head in disbelief, settling down into his usual seat. Kit frowned again. She suspected this had more to do with the move than anything. They both easily avoided the traps Pa warned her about. But she wasn't

complaining; the garden might have twice as many trees as the park, and no children trying to feed her soggy sandwich crusts.

Kit stared out of the small hole in the back wall. The sunlight was dipping across the park as the tall pines gently bobbed in the breeze. Pa's eyes were already wide, glazed over, his tense muscles relaxing into the curved wall of the den. Pa didn't know it, but the screen didn't seem to mesmerise her in the way it did him and the other animals. She knew he would be disappointed. Nowadays it was almost the only thing they did together. Kit curled up against his warm, bushy tail and closed her eyes. She hoped the move to a garden would change that.

## **Chapter 2: Pheasant**

The next day, Kit and Pa were shown around a small but comfortable two-bed, three-quarters of the way up the old oak tree that would be their new home. It lay thickly in the damp ground of a small field, next to a stream that marked the bottom of the garden. She had never seen a tree like it. Her claws hardly registered on the thick, weathered grooves of its enormous, crooked trunk. The branches lifted higher than she had ever climbed, stretching out above the garden like the great upturned hand of a giant.

'Garden views,' the Magpie said, wearing a midnight blue clip-on tie and talking very quickly. Through the small hole in the tree Kit could *just about* see a slither of the garden below, past a thick branch that fell across the opening. 'Properties like this? Double in value. Every year. It's an investment, if anything.'

Kit picked suspiciously at what looked like dead wood on the ceiling.

'Original features,' the bird said, edging Kit into the next room. He stroked the wall and a large piece of wood dislodged, fell to the floor, and burst into a pile of dust.

'*Weathered*'.

Pa nodded knowingly, then began to talk to the magpie about broadband connectivity this high up. Kit didn't much care what the den looked like. Pa had said she could climb for one hour a day, provided she didn't leave the oak and was back by nightfall. He said he

needed to do 'reconnaissance' before she could go any further. So far, he had mainly concerned himself with how they were going to top up the portable charger. He followed the magpie into the living room, asking about any current offers on extension leads.

The next morning Kit stepped out onto the thick, grey-brown branch of the oak tree. The air was cold and fresh, and a light summer mist sifted across the dormant garden. She was up long before the first flecks of sunlight peeked through the leaves of the old oak, and she watched as the day emerged, the thin blanket of dew lifting from the garden paths, the warmth of the sun sinking into the trunks of the grateful trees. The beds awoke, their flowers leaning to the east; bugs began to scurry for cover as the birds took to the air, bees buzzed to their daily work, and the garden simmered with the lazy heat of summer. She twitched her tail in excitement and breathed a deep breath, the sun filling her up like a balloon. There was nothing to disturb the peaceful day -

SHHHHWACRUNCH.

Kit shot up two branches and sat up on her hind legs, tail rigid. A brown blur had shot through the hedge behind the oak, circled twice around the trunk and skidded to a halt on the moist ground, sending a shower of leaves and twigs into the air.

'HAVE YOU SEEN A WASP?!' The large brown bird shouted, looking up expectantly at Kit, who hesitated.

'Yellow, stripey, about this big?' The bird moved both wings together. 'Usually angry.'

Kit hopped a down a little, 'Oh, no I know what a wasp looks like-'

'Oh good! You have seen him. Which way'd he go?!'

The bird flapped noisily and began a strange, languid walk around the tree.

'I'm not sure I-'

'No, you're right! Good idea. I'll go that way, you go this' the bird shot both wings out in the opposite direction, 'meet at the pond!'

The bird saluted with both wings, and with that, shot off back into the undergrowth. Kit stared down at the snaking trail of destruction, breaking twigs and flying flowers that followed. She looked up at the den. Pa had said not to leave the tree. She looked over the

hedgerow at the kaleidoscope of green, the trees bobbed invitingly in the slight breeze, waving their invitation. She hopped onto the main trunk and scurried up to the hole, listening. There was silence. Pa would still be asleep, probably. She swung herself silently from the branch, slid down the trunk and landed on the floor below. She looked up at the still quiet tree. Then, she followed.

With that, the morning was settled, and so too was a friendship. Kit climbed trees she had never seen yet seemed to know like family. She sprinted across weathered grooves of old ash, onto the slender trunk of the smooth, sleek silver birch and up, up, up the great, soft, furry red skin of the ancient redwood. She swung and vaulted across alder and yew, clambering through hazel, and sprinting through the thick, bright green leaves of the horse-chestnut. The bird, who was known only as Pheasant, had forgotten all about the wasp, and trotted around happily below, plunging a beak into anything that looked remotely edible.

After a time, Kit paused to catch her breath opposite the dense cover of an enormous weeping beech with a thick silver trunk. The fountain of branches arched all the way over to brush the garden floor, forming a glistening green dome in the gradually warming sunlight.

'Pheasant?'

'Mm?'

'It's so quiet here.'

'IMow, Myes, Sluvlyennit!' said Pheasant, beak firmly wedged in the end of a hollow log, pursuing a family of ants who were calmly walking out of the other end.

'Where are all the other birds? Is it just you?'

Pheasant ran suddenly forward, headbutting the trunk of the beech. The log exploded into a cloud of woody dust and sent a shower of unsuspecting ants into the air.

'Mow, nono' Pheasant said, gulping down the last two generations, 'Fwollowme!'

Kit soon forgot that they were getting farther and farther from the oak tree. She followed Pheasant onto a long, straight path lined with heaving bushes, knotted weeds and tall, prehistoric looking plants. The path stretched toward a mossy, tattered lawn on the crest of a slight hill. On it stood an old, leaning white cottage with an ivy jacket, peeling window

frames and a crooked, sprouting patio. A little way before the house stood the remains of an old orchard, where two crumpled apple trees nestled in the long grass like wise, unspeaking friends.

Kit stared at the orchard. Now she saw they were very much not alone. The trees shimmered and shook and bulged with the flight of countless small birds. They shot in and out of the branches, perching on the bird feeders that hung among them, flashing from one to another and neatly picking up any fallen seed from the ground. An extraordinarily large Pigeon held one of the feeders alone. He batted off any newcomers with remarkable agility, clasping onto the metal wiring with his small pink feet and eating intently.

Kit hopped forward.

'Woah there!' Pheasant held out a wing.

Kit looked perplexed.

Pheasant clucked affectionately, 'Well, you can't just wander up there! You're a squirrel,' Pheasant peered at Kit '...right?'

Kit nodded

'Exactly! / don't even get a look in half the time, and I'm a bird!'

There was a short, sharp chirp from behind them. A small thrush was watching Kit and Pheasant. It cocked its head curiously. Then it let out three more short, sharp chirps, and shot away.

In the orchard, the birds, notified by the call, settled quickly in the tree. Silence fell, as each stared out at Kit and Pheasant in the undergrowth.

'Aha, time we were off!' Pheasant said happily, lurching back the way they had come. Kit looked unhappily at the bulging feeders, her stomach still growling.

'Oh, don't worry!' Pheasant said, noticing, 'we wait until they go off to choir or one of their *meetings*, then we Hoover up any leftovers!'

Kit nodded, turning to follow. Despite there being many, many birds, there were almost as many feeders. Pa had been right, there was plenty for everyone. Yet Kit had been right



too; it was too good to be true. Just like in the parks, they weren't really welcome here either.

### **Chapter 3: Maintaining Order**

'Birds... please... you really must listen –'

'SQUIRRELS!'

'Now, I insist, we just have to –'

'SQUIRRELS!'

'If you would –'

'SQUIRRELS!'

SQUIRRELS'

'SQUIRRELS!'

'SQUIRRELS!'

'SQUIRRELS!'

BB, a large, efficient Blackbird, was struggling to maintain order. Garden meetings were usually a very tame affair. In fact, there were hardly ever more than two or three birds, unless they happened to land there accidentally. There was only one item on the agenda this week and, for the first time, the meeting was full.

'I am *sure*,' said BB imploringly, holding up her wings, 'that squirrels moving into the garden is nothing to worry about –'

'*NOTHING! WHAT ABOUT OUR NUTS!*'

'Mr Warbler *please*, you're shouting. There is to be no shouting at meetings –'

'WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN!'

'Ms Finch, you don't *have* any children –'

'AND OUR HOMES!' Mr Tit of the Tit family joined the chorus, 'I have only *just* had the second extension put in –'

'Never mind –'

'– your *extension*.'

The Wheateaters had an irritating habit of hopping around in circles and finishing each other's sentences.

‘– We’ve heard –’

‘– they watch –’

‘THE SCREENS!’

There was a loud chorus of disapproval from the birds, followed by a round of agreement-defecating.

‘And besides...they’re not...’ the two birds looked around nervously, as if the squirrels might be behind them, ‘ *native.*’

They hissed the dreaded final word in unison. The chorus of disapproving chirps grew louder, filling the clearing under the branches of the weeping beech as it bathed the meeting in a soft, green evening light. BB sighed.

‘Mr and Mrs Wheateater, you have only just returned from *Africa*. I hardly think you can talk about being native-’

‘That’s-’

‘-*Different!*’ Mrs Wheateater puffed indignantly.

‘We *Summer* there!’

‘We were born *here!*’

There was another round of agreement defecating.

‘Mark my words!’ called Mrs Tit indignantly, puffing out her yellow chest as her many chicks flitted desperately around her, ‘in No-Time-At-All, this garden will be FULL of squirrels!’

The birds chirped and called, egging her on.

‘AND they don’t even *sing*,’ joined Mr Tit, looking at his wife for approval, who nodded enthusiastically.

‘Well of course they don’t *sing*, Mr Tit’ BB said, exasperated.

'You just wait!' Mrs Tit continued, '*Swarms* of squirrels will be here overnight! That's not the kind of community we want for our children!'

BB didn't like to point out that Mrs Tit had booted one of her children out of her nest last week because there 'wasn't enough space'.

'You are all *exaggerating*. There's to be no exaggerating at meetings. The idea that squirrels are dangerous amounts to absolutely nothing but *gossip and rumour*.'

BB wasn't entirely certain of that. The birds were right, after all - squirrels weren't from their quiet garden community. Besides, she had heard plenty of stories. They were well known to be loud, aggressive, and rude, not to mention lazy. She certainly knew that screens were addictive and dangerous, that you could count on; they caused your brain to melt, and your eyes shortly after.

Nonetheless, it was important to stop panic spreading. That was the whole point of being Chair and Sole Member of The Committee. There had to be *order*.

BB looked up at Pigeon imploringly, who was sitting quietly on his usual perch high up in the dense branches. Along with her he was one the eldest birds in the garden and could usually be relied upon for an opinion. BB just hoped that this time, it would be in her favour. Pigeon scratched lazily underneath his right wing, staring down at the birds.

'Well, o' course, I 'av heard oner two things...' he said very slowly, for maximum effect.

'...and...as I do like t'say...ther ant no smoke wout fire.'

The birds stared at him blankly, as they usually did.

Pigeon closed his eyes wearily and flapped noisily down onto a nearer branch.

'I meenta say, course, I'm not fraid of no bleedin' *squirrel*.' He scratched casually under his left wing this time. The birds stared. '...Mind you, I 'av 'eard...'

Scratch. Stare.

'...parrently...well...'

Scratch.

'...they do have a tendency...'

Stare.

'...to *eat*...their young'uns with fried bird's eggs, on occashun...'

There was a short silence.

Then all order evaporated from the meeting. The Chaffinches, Mr and Mrs Wheateater, the Warblers, the Tit family and all of the Martins burst into the air. Feathers plumed; bird poo rained. Robin threw himself dramatically onto the floor and lay rigid, his eyes wide; Mr and Mrs Dunnock fainted, in unison.

Without a sound, K dropped like a stone from the perch he had held unseen since the meeting started. He landed on the mossy floor of the clearing with a dull thud and let out a short, shrill shriek.

The birds shot back to the safety of their perches on the instant. Robin quickly resurrected himself. Someone helpfully dragged the unconscious Dunnocks back to the safety of the branches, and Pigeon edged a little further up into the tree despite being a good deal larger than a Kestrel.

K stood for a moment, cocking his small head left then right. His round, ink-pot eyes fixed the songbirds with an icy stare.

After what seemed like a very long time, he spoke.

'You *woke* me.'

There was a long, awkward silence. The birds looked at the floor. Then they looked at BB. Mrs Tit nudged Mr Tit, who shoved BB into the clearing.

'Ah, er, yes well, as chair, I er, well... sorry, well, yes, no, absolutely. My fault.'

K's eyes bored into hers as she began to falter.

'You see, er, its erm, just the erm, the, well –'

'I *know* about the squirrels. Thank you,' K snapped.

'AH, yes, of course, no, no, sorry, yes, no of course you, er, do...'

BB bowed her head and retreated gratefully back into the group.

K clasped his wings tightly in his powerful back and began a long, slow walk around the clearing.

'Squirrels –'

'SQUIRRELS!' Mr Dunnock had erupted himself into consciousness.

K stopped and stared down at the tiny bird, who promptly fainted again. He unfurled a powerful, speckled brown wing and softly stroked Mr Dunnock's head, who quietly defecated in his sleep.

'Fortunately for all of you,' K soothed, continuing his ominous walk, 'I too wish to protect our little arrangement, which, we can all agree, works *perfectly*, for all concerned.'

He paused at this, waiting to see if anyone dared to challenge him. The birds murmured and fidgeted in agreement. Pigeon remained silent. It had long since been the way of the garden: K, who was unusually large for a kestrel and twice as vicious, patrolled the area, keeping out any other bird of prey and sounding the alarm for fox, or owl. He had gained a reputation in the fields surrounding the garden and kept his territory tightly. For that, he occasionally – and *quite* reasonably – reduced the bird community by one or two.

'I'd liketa see you teyk an a fullgrown *Squirre!!*' Pigeon scoffed incredulously, and a little too loudly. K rose a few feet from the floor with a single beat of his powerful, slender wings, landing on the branch in front of the plump, grey bird. Pigeon clattered noisily up a few branches, now almost completely out of sight.

'Nor do I intend to you great half-brained, flying rodent.' K looked back down into the meeting, 'But fortunately, I don't have to.'

He dropped back down with another powerful thud and walked slowly across to the thick, silver trunk of the beech tree.

'All we have to do is rely...'

He rasped a razor-sharp talon down the tree, tearing three deep, straight lines into the bark and pulling a chunk of it away.

'...on *reputation*.'

The birds shuffled awkwardly.

'It's all very simple. You need do nothing except stay *away* from the bird feeders for a few days. I will do the rest.'

The birds all looked at each other in alarm. Pigeon flapped indignantly. The Wheateaters stomachs growled in unison and the Tit family stared at the floor. K glared at them.

'How about a vote?' suggested BB rather quietly, after an awkward silence. K's head snapped in her direction. BB avoided his gaze.

'All erm, birds in favour of K's plan, erm, raise a wing now...'

K began his walk again, this time ominously close to the birds. There was a horrible silence.

Robin was the first to crack. He shoved a wing into the air, and nudged his neighbour, who did the same. Gradually, as K walked around the group, all wings crept into the air. BB was the last left.

'Er, well – that's settles that, erm, democracy in action! We agree, thank you, er, K.'

K let out a squawk of approval. He rose once again through the sweeping branches of the tree and was gone the next instant.

#### **Chapter 4: Barry Crump**

'Hello? Is anybody in?'

Barry edged into the open doorway. He was a small, round man who always wore a camouflage vest over his tweed jacket. Even in public. He had moved to the countryside a few years ago. Ever since, Beth, who lived next door, had known that he was destined to be her arch nemesis. His welly boots were too new.

Beth didn't mind. She had made it this far in life without having had an arch nemesis, which wasn't bad. Nobody really knew how old she was of course, or very much about her at all. She had lived by herself in the house since her dad had died when she was a teenager. She had never missed a day in its garden, apart from to trundle off into town in her small red car on market days, to fetch supplies and seeds for the vegetable patch. She had the hands of a brick layer from years of weeding, drank twelve cups of tea a day, and didn't suffer fools gladly. Passing villagers watched as she seemed to be able to carry loads of logs, leaves or

equipment many times her size, apparently spending all her time in a garden that seemed to remain almost entirely wild. She roared around on an ancient ride-on lawnmower that clattered and clanged as though about to disassemble, and still the grass remained at knee height. New hedges and shrubs emerged as if by magic, as flowerbeds blossomed each year despite an apparent lack of attention. Every morning, without fail, Beth managed to fill the forty-five bird feeders that hung amongst the branches of the old orchard, just down the slope from the white, leaning cottage in which she lived. Consequently, her garden was the meeting point and home to more birds than could possibly be counted.

Barry, who detested wildlife, had for some time now been trying to get permission from the council to sell his house and land to developers. This did not help his position as Beth's nemesis.

Beth strode into the hallway at the sound of a visitor, brandishing a shotgun.

Barry put his hands in the air.

'Oh, Christ Barry. I thought you were the BT man.' Beth waved the gun with a flick of her powerful forearm, her muddy shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbows.

'And you were planning on...shooting, the BT man?' Barry said, following her into the kitchen.

'Oh, it's only an old antique! Not loaded...I think.' She peered at the gun uncertainly, laying it down on the kitchen table amongst the piles of newspaper, gardening books and mugs of half-drunk tea.

'They keep trying to upgrade me. I've already got some kind of *phila operatic* nonsense -'

'Fibre optic?'

'That's the ticket! Been to you, have they? Borrow it if you like. Works a charm with the Jehovas!'

'I trust you got my email?' Barry interrupted.

'Tea?' Beth called, disappearing into the pantry with a clatter, '*...how can anybody lose a biscuit tin...*'

'No, thank-you...my email?' Barry looked for a place to sit amongst the papers and books that covered the available chairs, choosing instead to stand awkwardly. He wanted to keep the meeting as brief as possible; his camouflage jacket made him look silly in the kitchen.

'Or there's this?' Beth emerged triumphantly, holding a half full bottle of whiskey and a crumpled packet of biscuits.

Barry held up a hand, 'I'm fine thanks...at,' he looked up at the clock, 'quarter to one.'

'Suit yourself!' Beth poured a little whisky into her mug and sat down heavily in an old armchair in the corner of the kitchen, opening a paper.

'I can't stay long as it happens' said Barry.

'What a shame for us all,' Beth replied, not looking up from the paper, '*13 across – crumpled ostrich likes a fidget,*' she squinted at the page, 'I can't stand these cryptic-'

'*Squirrels.*' interrupted Barry.

Beth looked closer at the paper. 'No, it can't be that, too many letters...'

Barry frowned. 'Not the crossword! Squirrels. *Squirrels!* Here, in our midst!'

Beth peered at Barry over her spectacles, as if he were a small child. She put the crossword down slowly as Barry continued.

'*Vermin.* Any number by now! I've seen two, but who knows! Thanks to your thousands of feeders-'

'*forty-five*' Beth muttered, correcting him.

'...they are soon to be *everywhere*. I put it all in the email.'

'Barry dear, I'm over three-hundred years old; I don't *do* email.'

'I did tell you this would happen. You have let that garden,' he looked out of the window into the bulging, wild greenery, the rusty swings, the cracking patio, 'if you can call it that anymore...'

'Careful now,' Beth wagged a finger, gesturing with her eyes to the shotgun, 'I could still use it to bash your knees in.'



Barry brushed some of the soil and seed packets to one side, carefully unfolded a letter, and placed it down on the table.

'I'm just giving you a fair opportunity, Beth. Surely you can see, with *squirrels* back, that its time to let the place go?'

Beth looked at him wearily. She started cleaning the shotgun with her sleeve.

'As you well know,' continued Barry, clasping his hands behind his back and pacing around the kitchen table, 'Squirrels are not *native*. That means they will do all they can to get rid of the rightful population in a matter of weeks. Including your beloved *birds*.'

Beth rose quietly as he spoke, folding the paper carefully and placing it on the seat behind her. She walked around the table slowly, and stood directly in front of Barry, alarmingly close. He faltered.

'This *garden*' Beth prodded Barry in the chest, who stumbled slightly, 'has been here since before *I* was born, when they were only just getting excited about the wheel', she jabbed him again, 'and it will be here long after I'm dead, which might be any minute now, if I have to keep listening to this.'

Barry rubbed his chest.

'No-one; not a squirrel, or a badger, or a deer - *especially not a grown man wearing camouflage gear* - is going to change that. Got it?' she jabbed Barry one final time. He picked up the letter, straightening his camouflage vest haughtily.

'Well, we will see about that! Evidently you haven't seen your feeders lately?'

Beth frowned. She strode past Barry, nearly knocking him over, and stepped out of the back door onto the patio, around the corner to look down upon the orchard.

Her frown deepened as she looked upon the quiet, empty apple tree, the forty-five feeders full and swaying gently in the breeze.

Beth squinted at Barry.

'What did you *do*?'

Barry laughed incredulously. 'Me? Come now, you can't seriously believe I have anything to do with it. I told you, *squirrels*.'

Barry followed Beth back through the door to the kitchen and held out the letter.

'This is a copy of the proposal. I have the surveyors coming in a week to consider the viability of the area. Once it is accepted, then we will take it to the council.'

'I'll put it in my new filing system, with the BT letters,' said Beth, picking the letter up and throwing it behind her into the over-flowing waste-paper bin.

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Barry stood on the porch of the shed he had commissioned, *at great cost*, at the bottom of his own garden. It overlooked the hedge that bordered his land and Beth's. He stared disapprovingly at the billowing hedges and shrubs that nestled under the arching trees. He slipped on the heavy leather glove, raising his hand out at a ninety-degree angle. Moments later, K landed with a dull thud on his forearm.

'I see you have done well,' he said, stroking the back of K's head and walking into the hide. K bowed his head low.

'And you, sir - did she agree?'

Barry shook his head. 'No... but no matter. We gave her a chance.'

Barry was a greedy man. He wasn't ashamed of it. In fact, ever since he had moved into the country, he had been planning to sell the land around his home. So, when a supermarket chain approached him with an offer, he naturally jumped at the chance. Unfortunately, Beth had always stood in his way. Her garden teemed with wildlife. The great oak tree, home to countless animals and birds, stood on the border of their gardens, and technically on both his and her patch of land. Each time he applied to have it removed, the council reminded him that Beth must also agree, and that the area must first pass an environmental survey before sale of his land could even be considered.

And then, Barry got the breakthrough he was looking for. It was three weeks since he had discovered, through his hawk K, that mammals had access to mobile phones. K had mentioned it in passing, as if it were nothing particular to report. Barry had punished him with no food for a week for such an oversight.

He had wasted no time in erecting the large shed in the bottom of his garden, with a long basement room below it, for 'storage'. He equipped the shed with a super-fast computer connected to ten of the smallest portable cameras invented. He placed these in the surrounding area and Beth's garden, waiting to discover the exact location of the animals' dens. He waited until something left its den, and a screen unattended. Then, sending K to the den to retrieve the screen, he would leave it out in the open – seemingly. When the animal returned and found it lying in the grass outside, with a video streaming brightly, it had no time to question how this had happened. Already it was transfixed by the images and struck dumb. Barry need simply to scoop up his trap, and bring it, together with the animal and phone, back to the shed. Of course, he didn't kill the animal there and then. This would be far too time consuming, and besides, he was collecting tens of animals every week.

Voles, moles, badgers, hedgehogs, squirrels. He had even trapped a baby deer.

Eventually, Barry realised he could use the same phones again. Once he had trapped the animal, he could use the phone and track it, without even needing K to sneak into dens.

The final piece in the puzzle, was the birds. K had informed Barry that the birds took little notice in the screens. K suggested that birds were above such things, what with being able to fly and sing. Barry suspected it had more to do with the embarrassing fact of having feathered wings instead of paw pads. Touch screens and feathers are not a good match.

It was only in the last week that Barry realised he had been making a great mistake in trapping *all* the animals. Squirrels, with their reputation for territorial aggression, were the perfect cover. Previously K had only been able to catch and kill a few birds. Now, he could use the fear of squirrels to keep them in their nests, and so too, snap them up easily.

Barry stroked the back of K's head again as he looked down at his copy of the surveyor's letter. Tuesday was just around the corner.

'We must double our efforts. You know what to do.'

K bowed his head low again. Barry threw a slither of meat into the air and the bird caught it with a snap.

## **Chapter 5: The Dipton Vale Gazette**

Rory fumbled with the papers on his desk, trying to seem busy. Every so often he would look up and scan the room, pretending not to be watching his boss and supervisor who were in hushed conversation on the other side of the room, occasionally glancing over at him. He had been at the Dipton Vale Gazette for three months and needed a decent story soon. His last piece had been about fences.

He began to scroll through local social media, in search of a follow up story.

*'Second Compost Bin Explodes in Cranthorpe.'*

Scroll.

*'Horse Loose: Post Office Cake Sale Abandoned.'*

Scroll.

*'Phantom Phone Stealer Trikes again in Thumbsby!'*

Rory sighed, flicking back over to Solitaire.

'Who's winning?'

Rory nearly fell from his chair. His boss was standing directly behind him with his arms folded across his crisp white shirt.

'Er...sorry, boss, I-'

'Found me a brilliant story?' he said sharply, adjusting his blue and purple tie and looking over Rory's head. He put a shiny shoe up on the desk and began to polish it with the end of Rory's coat.

'I, yep just,' Rory stammered. He looked again at the three article titles on the screen.

*'Phantom Phone stealer strikes again in Thumbsby.'* He looked up hopefully. His boss looked down at him in the way he looked at the broken printer. He dropped a folder on Rory's desk with a bang, knocking over his mug.

'I'm glad you mentioned Thumbsby. Here, I've done the work for you, as usual.' Rory picked up the folder with difficulty. 'Those are the planning applications for the county.'

There's one in there somewhere for Thumbsby; All You Need supermarket. The old bat whose land it would be next to is digging her heels in. It's only a matter of time before she gives in, but go down and see what you can find out. Take some pictures, maybe get a quote. Environmental whacko angle, right?'

Rory looked at the folder gloomily. He didn't much like the prospect of badgering a crazy old woman, especially in the countryside. People in countryside usually had guns. He looked up at his boss, but he was already making his way back across the office.

An hour later, a thin branch smacked him in the shin as he fell over his second tree root of the afternoon.

'I hate the countryside!' he called, out loud, picking himself up gingerly. 'If I die out here, I won't be found for years!'

He waited. The trees stared silently back at him.

Rory, certain he had passed these trees before, looked down at his phone. The red dot had been frozen in the same place for twenty minutes. He struggled out of the ditch, squeezed himself under a hedge, and stopped. There was no doubt about it, he was in somebody's garden.

'Excellent...I'll be shot for trespassing, all for some *planning* applications...' he muttered. There looked around at what seemed like the residual order of a garden from a film. He walked along a soft, lime green mossy path lined with glowing flowers and prehistoric plants that looked as though they could swallow him whole. He stepped over a crumpled wall and his foot sank a foot into the wet ground on the other side. He swore loudly. Then he looked up. Beyond the wall were more trees than Rory had ever seen. The mossy path continued, snaking in and out of the mighty trunks and branches that arched over him, nudging one another in the slight breeze. He reached out and touched a huge red tree. The bark was furry and the trunk, at least five times the width of him, shot straight into the air like an enormous wooden needle. He continued, past an overgrown pond, its glossy surface plinking in the quiet shade. He ducked and squeezed through a hedge and emerged

suddenly, mercifully, back on to a long straight path, at the end of which in the far distance stood the small, white cottage.

'Who are you?'

Rory jumped for the second time that day. His phone flew out of his hand, bounced on the grass and shot under the bush from which he had just emerged.

A small, stout woman was standing behind him. Her white hair stuck in various directions, her jeans were more mud than jean, and she held heavy looking wooden box under one arm, and a small stepladder under the other.

'Here, where are your manners?' she offloaded the box to Rory, who nearly fell under the weight of it. 'Come on! Look sharp!'

She strode off along the path and into the shadow of green. Rory, without much choice, hitched up the box and followed.

The old lady led them down the winding path shaded with still more great trees, past dense bushes filled with creeping weeds and flanked by bright, colourful flowers where the hum of bees vibrated noisily. She turned suddenly into an overflowing vegetable patch and through a long, transparent plastic tunnel stuffed to the ceiling with tomatoes. Rory almost lost sight of the old lady, who seemed to float at great speed as she passed out of the tunnel. She strode through a large gap in a hedge and into a small, more open field with wild meadow grass so tall only her blue hat bobbed above in the distance. Rory jogged apace to catch up.

'Uh...wh...why...do...don't you...put in...some...mo..more...paths?' he panted, reaching her at the base of the most enormous oak tree he had ever seen. The old lady stood with one foot on the unfolded stepladder and one hand on her hip, shading her eyes as she looked up, high into the branches.

'Paths are for parks and model villages. This is a *garden*.' She looked impatiently at Rory, 'Well, up you go!'

He looked at her for a moment, then looked down at the box.

'Is this...a bat box?'

'Owl.'

'Right. And you want me to...climb?'

The old lady chuckled, 'You're a spritely lad!' she slapped Rory on the back, who stumbled, 'Owls are protected, see. Barry won't be able to touch it once it's up there,' she said gleefully.

'Who's Barry?'

'Come *on!* All-hands-on-deck. Some of us haven't got that long left you know. Off you go; or shall I report you for trespassing?' she smiled brightly.

Rory gulped.

Ten minutes later he was half-way up the oak tree, trying not to look down as he wedged the box between two large, heavy branches.

'Left a bit! I want him to be able to see it!' called the old lady from below.

Rory wondered how he got himself into situations such as these. He struggled upwards, wedging his left foot between the branches and maintain his grip, and life.

Then Rory looked down, which was a mistake. He closed his eyes and pulled himself tightly against the trunk.

When he opened his eyes, they were level with a small, round hole.

Inside the small, dusty den, was a Squirrel. The Squirrel was sitting quietly in front of a mobile phone, which was propped up against the far end of the wall, plugged into a portable charger. The squirrel was watching what looked like a documentary on beavers.

This discovery caused Rory to promptly forget where he was and step backwards.

When he remembered where he was he had very little time to consider his mistake.

He blinked, squinting up at the bright sun. Beth's peered down, fanning him with her hat.

'Are you dead?'

'I don't think so...' he said gingerly.

'Ah, you're fine! Hardly a fall at all, really! she looked up at the tree uncertainly. The dense leaves and lower branches had broken Rory's fall, and mercifully, he was unhurt. 'Where am I?' said Rory, lifting himself on to one elbow and rubbing his head.

'Oh dear.' She thrust a hand into his face, 'how many fingers?' she held two fingers up into his face, facing forwards.

'Two, two!' said Rory, waving her hand away. She grinned. Rory rubbed his head.

'Ah, see, you're right as rain!' said Beth, hitting Rory on the back again, who coughed.

'Anyway, I'd say that makes us even. Minor injury for a spot of trespassing?' she winked and straightened up, 'see you around!'

With that, she strode off back the way she had come.

Rory stumbled through the thick, wild garden and climbed gingerly into the seat of his car. He drove back to the office slowly, still wondering if he had just seen a squirrel using a mobile phone.

## **Chapter 6: Reconnaissance**

'Right, listen up. The old lady is going to be out all day. I've done the reconnaissance,' Pa pointed at Kit and spoke like a military officer, 'I'll go in, you'll keep watch-'

'Oh Pa, come on!' Kit tried to protest. In the park, there had been plenty of plugs: in the café, the public toilets and under the bandstand. Here, they would have to go into the old lady's house to top up the portable charger.

Kit sulked all the way up to the orchard. Pa scurried from bush to shrub, to the cover of the trees and the hedgerows, pausing every ten seconds to crouch frozen with his back to a tree, eyes darting, tail rigid.

'The old lady isn't even *here*' grumbled Kit, climbing the trees above him.

'You-Never-Can-Be-Too-Careful!' called Pa, crouching in the grass. He waved two fingers left, then up and down twice. Kit stared at him blankly.

'Cover me!'



'Cover you from *what?*' Kit hissed, looking around. There wasn't anything to cover. Ever since they had moved in, the garden seemed to be getting quieter and quieter. Only the hum of a far-off lawnmower floated over them as the still sunlight sat atop the gently bobbing trees.

'HI GUYS! Where you off to?!'

Pa leapt three feet in the air, performed two forward rolls and shot up a nearby birch, out of sight.

Kit sighed.

'It's just Pheasant, Pa. Hi Pheasant!'

Pa peered out from a hole in the tree. Slowly, suspiciously, he made his way back down.

'*You made friends with a Pheasant?*' he whispered, a little too loudly.

'We bonded over a mutual love of climbing!' Pheasant said brightly. Pa looked at the large, cumbersome bird, and frowned, raising his eyebrows at Kit.

'Hi Pheasant, ignore him. We're doing reconnaissance.'

'Oh, great!' Pheasant tried to become as small as possible, which wasn't very small, and started shuffling forward, belly pressed to the floor.

'*How's this?*'

Kit nodded, 'Perfect.'

They came out at the end of the straight path, Kit stopped.

'What is it?' Pa hissed, sitting bolt upright, his tail twitching.

'The orchard...look?'

Pa looked. They were used to coming before dusk to collect any fallen nuts while the birds settled in for sleep. But now, in the middle of the day, the apple trees were empty.

'No birds!' Pheasant cried happily, flapping noisily up to the nearest feeder and headbutting as many seeds from its small metal cage as possible.

'ShhHHHH!' hissed Pa, scurrying up the tree. 'We can come back for the seed later!'

Pheasant, you secure the perimeter.'

Pheasant looked blankly at Pa.

Pa sighed, 'it means check the area around the house.'

'Gotcha!' Pheasant saluted with both wings and sprinted off in a cloud of seed. There was a clatter and a bang as the bird found the garage. Pa closed his eyes wearily and turned to Kit.

'*You* keep watch.'

Kit climbed one of the apple trees, settled next to the closest feeder, and waited. Then she noticed something strange.

Two large feeders lay broken and smashed on the grass below, their contents scattered. Another swung loosely on its hanger, the metal bent and prized apart. She frowned.

It was then that Pheasant came lunging back around the other side of the house.

'I've been all around the Perry-Metre. Nothing! Where's the other one?'

'Pa? He's just gone in the house,' Kit said distractedly, as she examined what appeared to be a deep claw mark on the tree trunk beside her.

'Oh really?', said Pheasant, hoovering up the seed from the broken feeders, 'Das buave!'

Kit stopped and looked down at the bird.

'How do you mean, brave? The old lady isn't in?'

'Trool!' Pheasant gulped, 'still, there is Crenshaw.'

Kit froze.

'And...Crenshaw is...?'

'Oh, just this cat.'

Seconds later, it was Kit's turn to edge along the outside window-sill of the kitchen. She peered in and scanned across the busy room. Piles of books and papers on the

table, mugs and teapots, a sliced loaf of lemon drizzle cake loosely covered by a crumpled tea-towel. She was surprised that Pa wasn't making his way through that. Then she saw why. The door of the fridge was wide open.

'Pa!' Hissed Kit, edging her head through the small gap left by the open window. Pa didn't answer. Kit could hear scrabbling noises coming from inside the fridge.

She wasn't the only one.

From the top of a cupboard to her left, a long, black tail swished noiselessly. The cat crouched, shoulders tensed, poised to pounce. His yellow eyes were fixed upon the fridge, and he hadn't noticed Kit.

There wasn't much time.

Kit looked around. She slid into the window and dropped onto the kitchen sideboard, where a large metal pot lay drying. She put her back to it, her paws against the tiled wall, and pushed.

There was an almighty CLANG; the cat leapt into the air, smacked into the ceiling and let out a horrible screech. Pa poked his head out of the fridge. He was covered in jam.

'Kit?!'

'Pa RUN!'

The cat leapt into the fridge just as Pa leapt out. Then it gave chase.

Now, not many cats are quite as fast as a squirrel. But this cat was a cat used to catching mice and rats for Beth, and Pa, who was already sporting a good-sized belly, had just eaten half a litre of strawberry jam.

He dodged and weaved, threw himself under newspapers, into and out of cupboards. The cat was screeching and lunging, missing Pa by a whisker; Kit could only watch and as she did, she could have been sure that Pa was enjoying himself.

'Kit...' Pa jumped onto the edge of a laundry basket, 'quickly... get...the,' he ducked and jumped off, just as the cat threw itself in and became locked in a fierce duel with a pair of large white underpants, '...the charger!'

Pa toppled a pot of teabags over behind him, then a bag of porridge. The cat, furious, skidded across the dusty flakes, wearing the pants like a waistcoat. It was making sounds Kit had never heard another animal make.

'You want me to what?!'

'TODAY!' screamed Pa, who was rapidly running out of ideas.

Kit swung herself onto the counter, vaulted onto the table and sprinted across it to the other side of the kitchen. She skidded to a halt, wrapped the cable around her shoulder, picked up the heavy charger, and tugged.

For some reason, at that moment, Kit looked down. On top of the waste-paper bin to her left, there was a letter.

W-H-A-T...T-H-E...H-E-L-L...ARE...YOU DOING?!' Pa was dodging in and out of the kitchen chairs as the half-blind cat swiped madly at his tail, narrowly missing and tearing at the at the wooden legs of the table.

Kit ignored him, and peered closer at the white paper. It seemed important.

***Building Plan Contract 2.2. All You Need Supermarket Proposal.***

*This letter informs one Bethany Darner of the proposals to undertake a survey of Site A, (pictured), in the matter of All You Need Supermarket, Express Site, car park and adjoining road restructure.*

*Bethany Darner is hereby notified of the visitation of surveyor on 12/07/19.*

*Commencement of works dependent upon your signature, and the signature of involved party, Barry Crump Jnr.*

*Signed*

BARRY CRUMP JNR.

*Signed*

BETHANY DARNER

---

Kit jumped out of the waste-paper bin, wearing the charger like a small rucksack.

'NICE OF YOU TO JOIN ME!' shouted Pa, skidding past her with the cat in pursuit. He shot back up onto the sideboard and Kit followed him through the window, just as the cat pulled the underpants off its head. It hit the window with a thud, its paw clawing at the air through the opening as the two squirrels made off across the patio.

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'Listen, I'm just getting in now – could we talk about this later?' Beth pushed open the kitchen door.

'Of course, Mrs Damer, it's just we didn't really get a chance the other day,' said Rory.

'I don't know why you want--CRENSHAW!'

Rory moved the phone away from his ear.

'Mrs Damer?'

*'Come HERE – I'm going to make you into a pair of gloves. You watch!'*

'Excuse me? Mrs Damer...'

Beth strode across to Crenshaw and prized him away from the window ledge where he was hanging, a paw thrust through the opening, clawing at the air outside. The kitchen looked as if it had just had a visit from a baby tornado. There was porridge all over the floor and teabags all over the table; the fridge door was open, and laundry and paper were strewn across the table and chairs.

'No dinner for you. For a week!'

Crenshaw mewed unhappily.

'I'm sorry Mrs Damer, I'm not sure...'

Beth picked up the phone again, looking out into the garden just as two squirrels disappeared into the trees.

'Sorry dear – I'll have to call you back.'

## Chapter 7: Hodge

Kit sat slumped against the apple tree.

'Pheasant?'

'MMmmfmhhhhh.' Pheasant was face down on the grassy floor, groaning quietly.

'I think... I might...be full?' said Kit, with difficulty. For the third day running, the birds had been absent, and they had visited the orchard whenever they liked.

Kit sloped down the tree, and sat next to Pheasant, looking out over the quiet garden, her tail twitching. She looked again at the trunk of the apple tree. More bark had been stripped away, and more feeders lay broken and smashed. Pheasant was clumsy, but not that clumsy.

'Don't you think its odd?'

Pheasant didn't respond.

'The garden, Pheasant? Where is everyone? And the feeders?'

'MMwho cares!' Pheasant groaned, struggling to roll over. 'Moreforus!'

Kit frowned. Something didn't feel right.

'We need to get to the bottom of this.'

Pheasant groaned again, getting up and reluctantly following Kit into the garden.

They crossed from corner to corner, Pheasant violently inspecting each shrub and bush, and Kit climbing almost every tree. Still met no bird, heard no warning call, no song. There were no mice darting for cover, no rustles and sounds louder than a beetle or the whirr of a passing wasp. They reached the ash trees that stood in the dense hedgerow of hazel and beech that marked the border of the garden. Below them was a small, quiet footpath, and beyond, a wide, green field where some ten cows grazed lazily together, their tails flicking slowly to ward off the determined flies. Kit sat on her hind legs on a tall fence post while Pheasant inspected the hedgerow beneath, where rubbish often blew from the adjacent road, quiet as it was.

'Look!!' Pheasant called, bursting onto the small path and dropping the days' finds: a crisp packet, half an old pen, and a leaflet.

Kit hopped down.

'Lovely' she said. Then she looked closer. The leaflet was red and gold, the lettering familiar.

'*Supermarket...*'

'Hm?' Pheasant said, head stuck inside the crisp packet.

'Here look – I've seen this before.' Kit read aloud:

'Coming SOON – All You Need Supermarket (**illustrated flyer**)

'What's a supramrakette?'

'I'm not sure...'

'Did mi hear yuh seh, *supermarket?*'

Kit started and circled back up into the cover of the tree, peering down. Poking from the hedge a few yards down from them, was a small, black snout.

'Hodge!!' Pheasant cried happily, lunging over to the snout.

'Pheasant, mi fren!' the snout cackled happily, emerging fully from the hedge, 'you dun woke mi!'

Hodge was a large, friendly, almost entirely spherical Hedgehog. He had long, dark grey spikes that stretched across his back, and his eyes twinkled with wise mischief.

He flicked his powerful snout in a gesture to follow, and disappeared under the hedge. Moments later, the unlikely trio were making their way across the open field behind the garden. Hodge led them along a path under the hedge around the border of the field, long trodden by generations of sturdy paws. He assured Kit, who didn't much like there being no trees for cover, that there was nothing to fear. Pheasant happily lurched in circles through the field, head poking up obliviously above the tall grass. They began to climb gradually, making their way toward the brow of a small hill and a small copse of oak. Kit gratefully shot up the nearest trunk, ahead of the other two.

'Dat,' Hodge gestured with a wave of his sturdy snout to the valley that sloped down into the town beyond, 'be ah supermarket.'

Kit stared down into the valley below.

At the edge of the town, standing sharply against the soft green fields, was a building she had never seen the likes of before. It was enormous, far bigger than the shops that stood across from the park. The great glass walls stretched as far as the eye could see, sharply reflecting the mid-morning heat. Cars snaked across the baking tarmac like giant ants in a great long line, beeping and growling in hot frustration. A shoal of humans hurried past one another, pushing laden metal trolleys, while the sweaty plastic handles of their heavy bags stretched to breaking point.

'What are they all doing?' Kit said, quietly.

'Shopping' Hodge replied gravely. 'Fi dem bikkle.'

Kit looked blankly at Hodge, a little embarrassed.

'Oh! Bikkle, *food*.' Pheasant said proudly.

Kit looked down again into the valley.

'So, that's what they want to bring to the garden?'

Pheasant shrugged, 'guess so?'

'And...we'll have to go away?'

'Ah course!' Hodge cackled.

'There'll be diggers, humans everywhere, you name it,' said Pheasant.

Kit saw that the two animals were so used to moving when humans came that it was no longer a choice. It was a simple fact of life. She thought about this as they hurried back across the field. They bade Hodge goodnight and slipped under the beech hedge, back into the garden.

For the rest of the day Kit was quiet and withdrawn. She followed in the tree line above Pheasant who happily lurched toward the orchard, having seemingly forgotten all about the supermarket. Kit looked around at the steadily falling dusk that seeped into the garden and sat up suddenly on all fours. Pa would probably be awake by now.

'I've got to get back Pheasant. See you again soon?'



Pheasant saluted. Kit darted back up into a nearby birch, and made her way through the canopy, back to the old oak.

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Mr and Mrs Warbler chirped irritably. The Tit family chicks wailed. The Dunnocks' stomachs grumbled in unison, while the rest of the songbirds chirped angrily at BB, who was guarding the opening to the beech tree, and once again, trying to maintain order.

'They've scoffed nearly *all* of our nuts.'

'We worked *hard* for those!'

'Mr and Mrs Tit, none of us *work*.'

'Well...' Mrs Tit said, embarrassed, 'neither do *they*.'

'AND THEY DON'T EVEN SING!'

'Thank-you, Mrs Dunnock, we *know* they don't sing, but please, *shouting-*'

'Surely one or two can't hurt?' implored the Wheateaters. There was a loud murmur of agreement. Blackbird looked back at the group.

'Now. We *voted*. You all agreed to –'

'I SAY WE VOTE AGAIN!' Mr Dunnock shouted. There was a loud round of chirps, and the group hopped forward as one.

'Aha, well,' BB chuckled nervously, 'I think you'll find this *isn't* protocol...'

'All in favour'. Every one of the birds, except BB, raised a wing. Mr and Mrs Dunnock put both their wings up, as if being held by gunpoint.

BB chuckled again, more nervously still, 'Aha, well, as you *well* know, only an elected member of the board of birds can call a vote. And as the only-'

BB was forced to duck suddenly, folding both wings above her head as the birds rushed her. She unfurled gingerly and peered out of the clearing where dusk was beginning to flood into the orchard. The birds were gorging themselves happily.

A shadow fell across Blackbird's view, and there was a dull thud from behind her. K twitched his head left, then right, his gaze set on the feeders.

'I tried to tell them...' BB tailed off as K walked ominously toward her.

'I did everything I could! Stay off the feeders, a simple instruction!' BB said, shaking her head backed away slightly. 'Yes well, its all well and good with a bit of voter intimidation! But voting on an empty stomach, that's another matter!' K

fluttered his wings impatiently.

'Fortunately for you, we have a plan-B.'

'We?'

K rose into the air and flew straight at BB. His talons closed tightly around her back, and she was lifted into the air. Paralyzed with fear, she watched as the garden grew smaller and smaller as she was lifted high above the tree line. Then, K dived. BB closed her eyes against the rushing wind, waiting for certain death. Down, down they seemed to drop, until suddenly she felt the bird's talons snap open.

Before she had time to react, BB felt herself hit the floor. There was a mechanical whirr and the sound of a door closing with a snap. She opened her eyes and instinctively tried to fly to safety. She crashed against wire metal. Her feet scrabbled on the thin caging, as her eyes adjusted to the dim light.

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Kit fidgeted nervously. Eery sounds met them as they crouched waiting; Foxes called, badgers grunted, owls hooted their warning. Every rustle of leaves, however far away, sent shivers through her fur as it stood up on the back of her shoulders and tail. Kit has, against all her instinct, convinced Pheasant to wait until dusk. At dusk, the garden changed, and if they were going to find out why it was so quiet, nightfall was the place to start.

They made their way past the orchard and down, down, deep into the garden. The small, dense wood that lay at its border ached silently in the soft grey moonlight. Kit climbed into the cover of the trees, and Pheasant crouched in the darkness below. Nothing happened for a good while, and Kit, safely nestled in a warm crook of two thick branches, fought the urge to sleep.

'PPPST!'

Kit jumped. Pheasant was pointed with a wing into the gloom. Kit peered.

Through the trees, there seemed to be a small blob of white light.

'I think it's just a screen!' hissed Kit.

'Out in the open like that?'

That was true. It was unusual for an animal to use a screen outside the safety of their den. Kit climbed down and they made their way slowly, carefully, toward the light. They stopped in the cover of a hawthorn, and looked over at a group of four mice, all huddled together in a small clearing in the trees.

They watched.

The mice, despite the rapidly falling darkness, didn't move. They were under the same familiar stupor, relaxed, eyes glazed. But they were nowhere near the safety of a den, and there was no lookout animal.

'We should help' Pheasant whispered, starting forward.

'Wait.' Hissed Kit. 'I'll go – I'm smaller, and faster. You keep watch.'

Kit started forward. She sprinted quickly and lightly on her sturdy paws, her head snapping left and right. She reached the mice. Even as she entered the clearing, they did nothing. They continued to watch the screen. Kit nudged one of them. It turned and snarled and yipped. She had never seen a mouse do that, and she hopped back slightly, puzzled.

Then she saw it. A small light that was beeping rhythmically like a tiny heart. It seemed to be suspended in the leaves and twigs that surrounded her and the mice. Something wasn't right. She suddenly remembered Pa's warning about the traps, hidden amongst the trees, made to look invisible.

Kit squinted around her. Sure enough, the mice were hunched in a space that didn't fit in the garden. It was too straight, the leaves that covered it didn't hang from a hedge or tree, they...were camouflage.

'The leaves aren't *real*' Kit hissed. '*It's a cage.*'

'KIT!'

Kit was suddenly dragged backwards and flung onto the mossy, damp floor.

'What do you think you are *doing* watching out here in the open?! Haven't you listened to anything?'

Pa was standing in the clearing, tail bristling in the moonlight. Kit struggled up.

'I just woke up, to find my screen missing! I should have known it was you!'

'Pa, wait, it's not safe!'

Suddenly, the flashing light changed to constant. There was a mechanical whir and a door slid down from above, completing the cube and closing with a SNAP between Pa and Kit.

Pa instinctively sprang to escape. He crashed into the metal door of the caging and cried out. Some of leaves and twigs that covered the clearing fell away, and Pa looked wildly about him, his eyes bulging.

'Kit, RUN. It's a trap, it means someone's coming!'

Kit sprang onto the cage, climbing every side, scrabbling underneath it and scratching at the door. 'I'm not leaving you!!' she cried.

'GO!' bellowed Pa.

Then Kit was knocked off the cage and bowled into the undergrowth for the second time. Pheasant, moving at great speed, had shoved her hard.

'What are you doing?! Wait, PA!'

'Shhhh!' Pheasant hissed, holding Kit down under cover with a powerful wing. 'He's right, there's someone coming.'

Kit stopped struggling.

A man dressed in dark clothing came crunching through the undergrowth, straight for the cage. He stooped down and unlocked the other end, removing the phone before Pa could try to escape. He put it in his pocket. The mice slowly began to come to, but it was too late. The man had closed the cage again and strode off into the darkness, carrying it under his arm.

'Come on!' hissed Kit.

The man walked purposefully back through the garden, and disappeared through a small hole in the hedge. Kit climbed high into the trees and watched as he continued his stride toward a large, wooden outbuilding. He placed the cage on a small platform, then walked into the building. As he did so, the cage sank down into the floor below the shed. A trap door closed with a mechanical thud, and all was quiet, as if nothing had happened and there was nothing to see there at all.

Kit and Pheasant stood shivering as full darkness enveloped them.

### **Chapter 8: The Red Dot**

Rory had returned to the office with very little to show for his efforts. He had somehow convinced his boss, who had hardly seemed to be listening, that a follow up interview was needed.

He parked up once more in Thumbsby, outside Mrs Damers house. He took out his work phone and searched for the Wifi. Sure enough, an open network popped up, with no password. Rory began to feel like a secret agent, instead of a junior local newspaper reporter. He enabled the FindMe app on his old phone; if he was right and a Squirrel, or maybe another animal, was using it, he wouldn't need to work at the Gazette, or anywhere else ever again. His eyes glinted with greedy excitement as he looked down at the little red dot on the map, no more than twenty yards away. He pinched the screen and looked closely at the route. He swivelled the phone. Next door? He thought, puzzled. Why would the neighbour have his phone? Rory grabbed his camera and notepad, climbing out of the car.

A few minutes later, Barry Crump was showing him through his home, apparently thrilled that the gazette wanted to do a two-page spread on local entrepreneurs.

'It's going to bring lots of jobs to the area, and community,' he said, proudly. Rory nodded.

'And, erm, where will the new site be, exactly?'

Barry ushered Rory through into the garden, which was almost entirely made up of decking and false, Astroturf grass. Rory pretended to take some notes.

'So, why, can I ask, do you want to sell the land?'

'Ah!' Barry cried with a finger in the air, apparently delighted by the question.

'*Progress*, of course.' Rory waited, awkwardly.

'You see, there's *nothing* here!' He gestured to the garden and the fields beyond with wide open arms, 'these empty fields aren't agricultural anymore, so why shouldn't they be *useful*. All we have here are rodents and pests! Not last week, some *squirrels* moved into the area.'

Barry practically spat the last word, waiting for a suitable reaction. Rory, who had no idea how to respond, pretended to take some more notes. He took out his phone to pretend to check the time, and looked at the dot, not two yards away now. He looked around the garden. In the far corner, stood a large, wooden outbuilding on a raised platform, which looked over into next door's garden and the fields beyond.

'And...in there?' Rory pointed.

Barry's eyes twinkled.

'Ah...I really *shouldn't* show you...'

Rory feigned great disappointment, moving to put away his camera and notebook.

'But, well, off the record?' Barry said quickly, not wanting the attention to end.

Rory nodded. Barry strode happily down the garden, taking out his phone and pressing it. The door slid open with a mechanical whirr and Rory followed Barry into the dark hide.

Barry flicked on the light and Rory winced in the sudden brightness. Then he jumped.

On the wall in front of them, surrounding an enormous computer monitor, were an uncountable number of small, white skulls. Rory squinted, shielding his eyes against the light.

'Impressive, isn't it! From here, I can control everything.' Barry gestured to the computer. The screen was covered in grey, flickering squares. Rory peered closer.

'Cameras!' Cried Barry proudly, who was becoming more and more animated. 'I have them stationed all over the surrounding area. When something that doesn't belong comes in to one of my traps,' Barry pointed to the right-hand wall, where a stack of perhaps 20 cages stood 'I can snap them up.'

Rory stared.

'Badger' Barry stroked a nearby skull, walking across the room. He took Rory by the arm, leading him along the wall.

'Ferret...Squirrel, Deer. Ah, and a personal favourite of mine!' he gestured to a row of tiny skulls that were hung in descending order, from largest to smallest, 'a family of Moles'. Barry winked. Rory winced. 'Here, you can be the first to enjoy my new business card.' Barry handed Rory a small business card, heavily laminated in plastic.

'Indestructible!' Barry called, walking into the next room.

Rory took out his phone. The red dot was flashing, right underneath the blue dot. His phone was somewhere in here, he was certain of it. He looked up from the screen. Barry was nowhere to be seen.

Then, the light went off.

'I, wait-' Rory put his hands out in front of him. He was in total darkness. He tried to walk gingerly forward, stretching his arms out in front of him. He touched something hard, metallic...like wire caging.

It was then that Rory began to sink into the floor.

'Hold on-'

Rory dare not move. It was a horrible feeling, being lowered down in the pitch black. There was a mechanical click. Rory felt gingerly along the caging wall, desperately trying to find an opening. Then, a light above him flicked back on.

Rory looked up, terrified, baffled.

'Ever so sorry about that. But it can't be helped!' Barry's head poked out into the opening left by the trap door. He chuckled at Rory, staring up, wide eyed and panicked.

'Come now, you don't really think I hadn't seen you, skulking around next door?' he laughed. 'It was only a matter of time before someone else discovered it. Don't worry, you can have the glory! Just as soon as I've emptied that garden, and the old bat has signed, I'll let you go!' Barry smiled broadly and waved.

Rory shook the cage, 'Wait, I – you can't be serious-'

But before he could protest, Barry had tapped his phone and the trap door had slid back into place with a mechanical snap.

It was only then that Rory realised he was not alone.

When the trap door closed, he was not plunged into darkness. Instead, the soft, white light lit up what seemed to be a long, wide basement. At the far end of the room, there were perhaps thirty metal cages of various shaped and sizes. They seemed to be on tracks, like miniature metal trams, and slotted into a larger metal unit that made up three enormous shelves around the edge of the room. In each, an animal sat, staring wide eyed at a phone screen that flickered in an endless cycle of video. This was, of course, where his phone was. Rory had been right. The animals were *watching* the screens. There were badgers, hedgehogs, Mice.

There were...birds. Countless small birds. As he looked closer, he realised the animals were not really watching at all. Some were wide eyed, slumped and mesmerized by the images, some growled and scabbled, clawing angrily at the screens that were mounted outside the cages, unable to reach through and make them stop. Some were dead. The smell was almost unbearable. Rory pulled harder on his own cage door, shaking it with all his strength. It didn't budge. There was nothing he could do.

As he sat down in the dim, cold room with his arms around his knees, trying not to look at the animals, he realised that when he had made his discovery, he had thought only about what he stood to gain. And yet, this was what it would bring: animals in cages, experiments, misery and cruelty. Rory began to feel sick. He opened the networks on his work phone. No signal. An available Wi-Fi popped up, and he tried to connect. This time, of course, there was a password. Rory settled in. He would have plenty of time to try and figure this one out.



## **Chapter 9: BEAUTIFUL!**

'You can't be serious?!'

'Deadly serious. I told you they don't make me go all...' Kit made a wide-eyed face and stood rigid.

'Still, you don't know what's going to be in there!' Pheasant protested.

'Well, that's why I'm going in!'

'But...what if you can't get out?'

'I told you, the screens don't affect me. The only reason those mice couldn't escape is because of the screens, right?'

Pheasant looked uncertain. 'And if they're all...you know?'

'Dead? Well, we're just going to have to take that chance. If he was going to kill the animals, why wouldn't he have done it there and then?' said Kit.

In truth she wasn't entirely sure of that herself, but she hadn't any choice. Pa was in danger because of her. And she was certain that the supermarket and the disappearing animals were connected somehow. All she needed now, was a screen.

'And you're certain, they'll have some, down there?' Kit stared into the hole.

They had made their way to the brick garage that sat heavily in the foliage of the front garden some yards away from the house. The far-side wall, which was lined with a skirting of tatty, wooden slats, had a corner missing where wood had been scratched away.

'Oh, absolutely. The rats *love* the screens. They'll have hundreds. I'm absolutely certain they won't mind us borrowing one.'

Kit looked at suspiciously at Pheasant. She had never met a rat, but she had heard plenty of stories. They were known to be aggressive, rude and dangerous. Not to mention, they *stank*. But they didn't have much choice. There wasn't another house for miles, and though the old lady might have one, Kit didn't feel like another race with the cat.

She looked at the hole, then at Pheasant.

'Obviously you don't expect me to go in there alone.'

'Ah, well, annoyingly, I can't see in the dark.'

Kit frowned. She was pretty sure their night eyesight was the same.

'I'll keep watch!' Pheasant said brightly, backing slowly into the cover of a nearby bush and crouching low.

Kit hopped inside, and found herself in a tight, dusty tunnel. Fighting against all instinct to sprint in the opposite direction, she crept forward, and as the light of the outside gradually dimmed, she was in complete darkness. After what felt like a very long time, Kit began to be able to see her paws moving slowly before her, one in front of the other. She felt the space around her open slightly, and stopped. She sniffed. The smell was becoming distinctly like pond water and old binbags.

PSSSSTHHHCRACK.

A match had been lit not three centimetres from Kit's nose. She would have jumped, were she not completely frozen in fear.

'Appointment?'

An ancient rat was sitting behind a desk, made of what looked like old cotton buds and lollypop sticks. It didn't lift its nose from the enormous pad of sticky notes that it was slowly flicking through.

The blood made its way back into Kit's brain, and she shook her head.

'Sorry I-'

'- Do you,' the rat pointed at Kit, then wearily at the ledger, 'have...an...appointment.'

The rat looked over its spectacles at Kit, apparently unimpressed that she was a Squirrel.

'I, er...no, I didn't realise --'

'Here.' The rat held out a small lanyard made of an old bottle top and some string.

'Straight down, third left, wait in the waiting area.'

Kit slipped the lanyard over her head, and carried on past the rat, who dipped a long, wizened claw into the back of a split ballpoint pen and scribbled in the ledger.

Kit carried forward along the dusty passageway. As she crept, it seemed to be getting lighter. The smell was also disappearing. It smelt instead like...fresh flowers.

She rounded a corner and stopped.

The large platform she now found herself on looked like black marble. On it were two enormous glass vases filled with the flowers she saw in the garden every day. Over the balcony, stretching out below her, was the longest room she had ever seen. The walls were covered with countless flickering screens; some were black, some showed human games or videos, some showed pictures. On the floor of the room were rows, and rows, and rows – and rows, and rows - of little black desks, stretching so far into the distance that Kit could not see the final row. At each desk there were rats of all manner of sizes, shapes and colours, busy in all manner of ways; screwing parts together, cleaning and jabbing away at screens, talking busily into enormous headphones, scurrying to-and-fro with armfuls of plastic parts. Kit stared. None of the rats seemed at all concerned by her entrance, apparently satisfied by the visitor's lanyard.

'Impressive, isn't it?'

Kit looked up. On a floor above her, stood a large, white rat, dressed in a dark, navy suit. He beckoned to Kit to join him, disappearing through a small opening. Kit gulped. She was beginning to get an uneasy feeling, but she had come this far already. She climbed the metal staircase.

The white rat's office was enormous. Inside it was a human-sized desk and chair, which made the rat look extremely silly as Kit entered, and he swivelled round to greet her. The office was full of screens. Every available surface, including the floor, was screen. There was only a small gap in the wall of screens, where a window looked down onto the factory floor. Kit padded slowly across the flickering videos, her mind swimming in the brightness.

'What is this place?' she said, looking out of the window and down onto the bustling rats. 'It's, so...'

'Beautiful?!' Kit didn't say anything. The rat laughed. 'And *clean*? Aha! Yes well, all that dirty rat nonsense, that's just a clever front!' The rat waved a paw, 'I even had a few bins placed at the entrance, just to put people off.'

Kit stared around at the screens. The rat peered at her, apparently impressed that she was not in a stupefied state.

'This is our very own screen *factory*'

The rat chuckled again, nodding excitedly.

'Humans are *ever* so careless. They leave the things lying around everywhere! They throw perfectly good phones away all the time! See that section,' he waved a paw across to the far side, where rats were busy fitting shiny new screens onto old motherboards, 'that's the Refurbishments Department. All of those phones are smashed by humans and left in drawers, sometimes forever!' he threw up his paws excitedly.

'All I need do is send out a few of my very best finders, and a few minor repairs later, PRESTO!' The rat leapt into the air, wide eyed. 'And that's just the broken ones. See over there,' he shot over to the window on the other side of the office and pointed, 'that's Outdated Phones Department; those are the ones that no longer work for human software. Each year a human gets a new phone, even if the old one works, simply because there are always newer, faster, more BEAUTIFUL machine available! But of course, a Hedgehog hardly needs the latest software! Or a mole! HA!' He jabbed excitedly at the window, 'they're happy simply to sit and enjoy the screen for the beauty that it is! And *isn't* it beautiful!' He shot back over to chair and scrambled into it, staring lovingly at the screen mounted on his enormous desk.

Kit didn't answer. The uneasy feeling in her stomach was beginning to grow into full-scale panic.

'AHA! Now, look, here. Now, this is the *future*', the rat lead Kit over to a large, black box that was plugged into a screen on the wall. Kit tried to back away, but two larger rats had appeared without her noticing, now blocked the doorway.

'I can see you aren't affected in the same way by the screens, but for *this*, you're perfect! Where would you like to go?' The rat grinned, tapping away at the screen.

Kit frowned, puzzled. 'Is that a... time machine?'

The rat threw his head back and screeched with laughter, clapping his hands together with glee.

'Almost, but BETTER! This...is a *simulator*. You can stay right here and yet be wherever you like! It's BEAUTIFUL!' He banged a paw on the desk. Kit didn't understand.

'Choose anywhere – Paris? New York? The Caribbean? From right here you can simulate the feeling of the beach between your toes, or a winters day in Lapland! You can feel warmer, calmer, happier!' He paused and stared greedily at Kit, who had no idea what he was talking about.

'You can even feel *full*.' The rat threw out his hands and shouted, 'FULL!' This time he banged both paws on the desk.

'Think of it! No more scrabbling in the dirt for food, no more hunger, no more desolation! Simply a good supply of any food and we can simulate it as the *greatest meal you've ever tasted*! Chocolate milkshake? Roast Chicken! *Doughnuts!!* Animals everywhere, free from danger! Free from want!'

Kit gulped. She had to try and steer the conversation back to reality.

'I... I haven't come here about that. I...I need your help, a supermarket, I need to borro-'

'Oh, come come, I know all about the supermarket!' The rat waved an irritated paw in the air, and Kit froze. 'Don't you see? It's *perfect*. We can live freely from their leftovers, and with the simulator, each day will be a beautiful feast. BEAUTIFUL!'

It was quickly dawning on Kit that she needed to get out of this room.

'Surely you can see, there's no point in fighting it. Technology is our *saviour*. Why don't you try it on, and see for yourself...?'

The rat was now starting towards Kit, cable in hand, its red eyes wide. Two guard rats had appeared from nowhere and were behind her on either side. All three rats began to edge Kit towards the box. Kit looked around; the room was one great cage, the only door was behind the three rats, and they were getting closer.

Suddenly, Kit saw a rat fly into the air on the factory floor below; then, another. Something was happening. 'Wait, what's going-' Kit pointed behind the white rat, who smirked.

'Oh, come, come, you don't think I'm going to fall for the olde-'

'*STOP!! WHERE IS YOUR VISITORS PASS?*'

The rats wheeled around and followed Kit's gaze. On the factory floor below, a rat was thrown across its desk and a screen was sent crashing to the floor. The next moment rats began to scatter, scurrying for cover as more screens flew into the air and desks were upturned. A small, official looking rat was waving a tiny clipboard, chasing something...something large...

One of the simulators was firmly wedged on Pheasant's head, who was lunging around the factory like a large, half-robot-half-bird, sending rats flying, desks toppling, and screens crashing.

'HA! What on earth...' the suited rat cried.

Before he had finished his sentence, Kit leapt into the air. She wrapped her claws around the cage ceiling, swung back, and thrust forward, kicking the white rat backwards into the two heavy guards. All three of them flew backwards through the door and tumbled down the steep, metal staircase. Kit sprinted forward shunted the upturned simulator forwards, pushing it down behind them. As the rats scrambled up, they were met by the speeding box on its way to a shelving unit full of wires that stood, not for much longer, behind them.

Kit sprinted down the staircase.

'PHEAAAASANNTTT!'

Pheasant's robot head popped up amidst the scurrying rats who were trying in vain to bring down the intruder.

'FOLLOW THE MUSIC!!!'

Kit grabbed a screen from the floor, clicked it to loud, and loaded up the first video she could find. Then, holding the screen above her head like a shiny black surfboard, she sprinted for the exit.

'SSTOP THEMMMM!' the white rat screamed manically, standing up and dusting off his suit.

Kit didn't stop. She flung herself back around the corner, sprinting past the upturned desk and the ancient rat who was trying in vain to retrieve the scattered ledger. The tight tunnel had been made a good deal wider by Pheasant, and Kit shot through the hole, back out into the bright sunlight and once more in the cover of the bushes.

She waited, panting, crouched. For what seemed like an eternity, nothing happened.

It was Pheasant's bottom that appeared first.

There was a short struggle, then POP.

Pheasant tumbled backwards. Where the hole had been, the robot head was now wedged.

'Come on!' Kit called, 'that won't hold them for long!'  
As fast as they could, they sprinted off back towards the oak tree.

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Rory woke with a start. The door in the ceiling was open, and into the basement, a small cage was slowly dropping. The cage settled on the floor with a click, then slid mechanically along slats away from Rory's cage, like a small tram. It settled into the far wall amongst the others. Inside was a little squirrel, sitting still and staring forward at the screen. Rory sat back down.

But there was something different...

The squirrel suddenly sat up and looked around. It was alert. It looked at the animals, then at Rory, then at the screen. It wasn't like the others, slouched over, staring. It scurried to-and-fro, trying to escape, scrabbling at the cage. Eventually, exhausted, the squirrel sat on its hind legs, wringing its small paws where usually a nut might sit.

Rory shook the cage hard. He took off his jacket and threw it aside, rolling up his sleeves. He tried to prize the cage door apart. Still, nothing budged.

Then he looked down. The contents of his jacket pocket had fallen out on the cage floor. A small, crushed tissue as hard as a pebble, a set of keys for his work locker, three two-pence pieces, and...Barry's business card.

Rory picked up the card, turning it over in his hands. He held it to the dim light, taking it in both hands and trying to bend it.

Nothing happened.

Rory held the card against his knee and pushed.

Nothing.

He looked closer at the door of the cage. He looked at the slit in between the doors where the lock sat.

He looked at the thick, polycarbonate card.

Then he looked back at the slit.

Rory reached out, slowly pushing the card into the gap.

There was a loud, satisfying CLICK. The two doors fell open either side of Rory's outstretched arm.



Rory sat back in the safety of his car, panting. He reached back onto the seat behind and grabbed his work laptop. He was still connected to Mrs Darner's Wi-Fi. He logged in to his office hub and clicked on his Boss's picture. He gulped. He was hardly hacking into the Washington Post, but he knew he would get fired once his Boss found out. There wasn't time to go through the normal process of sending the article to the editors. He needed to get this out for the morning's paper.

'Gazette123'.

Correct passcode.

Rory began to type.

Twenty minutes later, he clicked send.

'Success! Your article has been uploaded.'

He went on to the Gazette's social media pages and posted the links to the article.

Then he emailed them nationally, just in case.

Rory closed the laptop firmly. He stepped out of the car once more and opened the boot. He pulled aside the gym bag – unused since he had been bought it two Christmases ago – and fetched the car jack. He didn't know how to use the car jack on the car, but he was pretty certain it would be useful for something else. He strode back toward the hide.

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The next morning Rory awoke with a start, banging his knee hard on the steering wheel. He rubbed his eyes. Two hours sleep in a small hatchback was not nearly enough, but Rory didn't have time to go home.

He knocked hard on Mrs Darner's front door. There was no answer. He walked around the corner of the house, and spotted her standing underneath the apple trees, hands on her hips.

'Look at all of this', she sighed as Rory approached, picking up some broken and torn tree bark that lay around the tree, and one of the feeders that had been knocked to the ground, its lid cracked and seed scattered over the grass.

'Mrs Damer?'

'Squirrels', she said, shaking her head. 'I didn't believe Barry, but here we are.' She finally looked at Rory and beamed. 'Call me Beth, dear, I did nearly kill you after all!' she chuckled and pulled herself up onto one knee with some difficulty, using Rory's arm for support.

'So, what can I do for you this time? Another spot of climbing?'

Rory paused. He hadn't considered how he was going to tell Mrs Damer that her neighbour had captured him, along with all the wildlife in her garden via the use of stolen mobile phones in order to convince the council to let him build a supermarket.

'Erm...'

'Is everything ok dear?' Beth peered closely at Rory, who had suddenly begun to feel faint. 'You look like you could use a biscuit.'

With a sudden strength Beth lead Rory promptly by the arm back to the house and into the kitchen. She plonked him down in the comfy armchair by the window, poured him a cup of tea with a small amount of whisky, and passed him a plate of crumpled looking biscuits.

'Start from the beginning dear, I find that's best.'

Rory sipped his tea and started from the beginning.

Beth hadn't moved while Rory explained, her arms folded, staring out at the overgrowing garden beyond her rickety swing and peeling, metal patio furniture. When he had finished, Beth turned around and looked sternly at him over her small glasses.

'Now, listen closely. You're not a loon, are you?'

Rory shook his head.

'You're not trying to make me look insane, so *you* can somehow make me sign over my house, put me in a home, and steal all my money?'

Rory shook his head again.

Beth considered. Then she glared harder at him.

'And most importantly...you're not from BT?'

Rory shook his head, a little puzzled.

Beth sat down opposite him. She sighed and reached behind her and passed the contract over to Rory.

'I haven't signed yet. But it's only a matter of time before someone builds here. I can't go on forever.'

Rory gulped. 'Well, see, I may have...invited some people here'

Beth frowned at him, then looked around for the shotgun.

Rory explained. He had not told anyone about the animals, the mobile phones, the evil neighbour. He had, however, invited the local town to a protest the felling of an ancient oak tree.

Beth looked at him. Then a wide grin slowly etched across her face.

'Good lad! So, we just need to stall them! I think I can manage that.'

'And the owl?' asked Rory, rubbing his head where the lump remained.

'Hm. I haven't seen one yet.' 'When are the surveyors due?'

The doorbell rang.

'That'll be them now' grinned Beth, picking her shotgun up from the corner. She strode out of the kitchen, and to the front door, pulling it open triumphantly. Barry was standing in his camouflage jacket, smiling his crooked smile, while a spindly man in a dark, thin suit stood behind him, peering over the cottage. When he finally looked at the little old lady brandishing a gun, he leapt backwards.

'Oh good, it's you!' Beth looked up and somehow down, at both of them.

'This is my associate,' she pointed to Rory with the gun.

Barry looked at Rory, and for a second, looked as though he might faint. He regained his composure.

'Delighted. Shall we start?'

Beth smiled and nodded, leading them all through the kitchen door, out onto the patio, and toward the orchard. As she reached the old apple trees, she slowed in her usual,

confident stride. The feeders were as empty as ever. Rory looked apologetically at Beth. The spindly man took some notes. Barry smiled.

'Shall we carry on to the rest of the property?'

Beth winked at Rory. She then took them through an intricate tour of the slinking paths, winding through the thick, green fog of trees, under hedgerows, through streams and thickets. Barry stumbled and the spindly man fell over three times before they had reached the oak tree.

'This tree is more than 150 years old,' Beth said proudly, as they reached the base of the trunk. She patted it affectionately, while the spindly man tried to prize some sticky weed from the lapel of his jacket.

'It looks it' said Barry, panting.

That morning, Kit had woken early after very little sleep. She wasn't sure what had happened. She had thought it would be easy to escape the cage, but it wasn't. One minute she was trapped like everybody else, then the next, the door was open. She had no idea why the young man was there, or how he had gotten free; or why he had come back some time later, carrying something metal and heavy. He had set about opening each of the cages, taking out the phones, locking each screen and dropping it in the centre of the room, before setting off again. It was strange enough for a human to be helping them, but this was stranger still. Nonetheless, eventually Kit had been able to guide Pa and the animals out of the shed once they had come to. Many hadn't moved. She didn't have time to dwell on it now. Her plan may not have worked, but they were free. There was still a way they could save the garden, but they didn't have much time.

'Pa, come on, we have to go!'

Pa hopped slowly into the hallway and folded his paws, looking stern. Kit gulped.

'What do you need me to do?' He said, smiling.

Kit explained on the way to fetch Pheasant, who was pleased, having naturally assumed Kit had died and continued to live life as normal. When they reached the beech tree, the birds were busying themselves. They were getting ready to leave.

BB flitted down to meet them.

'I...erm...we' she gestured with a wing to the chattering birds above, '...owe you an apology.' She thrust out a wing to Kit and Pa, who shook it lightly.

'But you're leaving?'

'Oh, well, they are!' said BB jovially, 'but I'll stick around I think. Committee can't run itself, after all!' she laughed, rather sadly. Pa frowned. 'They all know you weren't to blame, but in a way, the reality was much worse. They're off, to the parks, I should think.'

Kit looked up at the birds, who ignored the visitors, embarrassed as they were that squirrels had had their part in saving them.

'I tried to call a vote', said BB, 'but no one turned up. No appetite for democracy in these dark, dark times,' she shook her head gravely.

'*What's demuckracy?*' hissed Pheasant aside to Pa, who shrugged.

'*Democracy,*' corrected BB, 'allow me to explain. You see--'

'Sorry, BB, but we have a plan!' Kit interrupted.

BB stopped. She listened.

As Kit explained, she began to chirp and hop enthusiastically.

'Well! I like the sound of that; a bit of community *action!*' She puffed out her chest. 'Let's see...I think I can muster some lasting influence as chair of the committee!' She hopped decidedly into the centre of the clearing, and let out three short, sharp, shrill chirps, her feathers puffed out to maximum capacity.

Mr Dunnock pood alarmingly close to them, but otherwise, nothing happened.

'Ere, lemme try.'

They all turned as Pigeon waddled into the centre of the clearing. He was the most sheepish of them all, having spread the rumour that squirrels like to eat baby birds. He puffed out his own chest and let out a squawk so unlikely of his species, that all the birds shot back to their perches on the instant. Pigeon nodded to Kit by way of apology.

Kit hopped into the middle of the clearing and stood as high as she could on her hind legs. The birds looked down suspiciously, but none moved.

'Right...erm, we *do* have a plan...' she turned to Pigeon, 'but I, erm, don't think you're going to like it.'

A good while later, Mr and Mrs Tit, who had been sent to keep track of the humans, returned to the beech tree with the news that they were just entering the field. Kit nodded. They needed to get the surveyor close to the oak tree, if the plan had a chance.

'This is it; we need to go. How's it coming along?'

Pa shrugged and nodded. 'Not bad!'

'I think he looks *excellent*', BB said emphatically, trying to sound sincere. She nudged Finch.

'Oh, yes, yes absolutely. Are you sure you aren't related to one in some way?'

'I really didn't recognise you', said Mrs Warbler, trying to sound positive.

Pigeon glared out at all of them.

'I luk like a flamin' idiot' he grumbled, folding his newly white wings.

'No, no, no, not at all!' cried the Chaffinches, trying to hold back a giggle as Robin flitted around pigeon with the small brush, touching up his feathers.

'*Do you really think this is going to work?*' hissed Pa.

'Of course it will,' Kit said, reassuringly, 'anyway when he's in there', she pointed to the owl box in the distance, still wedged far up in the oak, 'no one would be able to tell. Especially not human eyes.'

Pigeon grumbled.

Kit spotted the four humans entering the field.

'Look, it's now or never. Everyone know what they're doing?'

Kit looked around at the random assortment of animals. Hodge had persuaded some of the night mammals to come, once the rumour of their plan had gone around the garden.

There were voles, mice, young Badger, Hodge's three cubs, a confused looking Guinea pig that had escaped from a neighbouring garden, Pheasant with two pheasant friends, and the birds. They looked anxiously at Kit, their small, unlikely leader. Pa, his arms folded at the back of the group, nodded to her, swelling with pride.

They followed her down to the hedge line to peer at the three humans standing on top of and around their home. Every instinct taught them to stay well away. Kit sensed their hesitation, which she shared. But her anger was more powerful than her fear.

'I know, it might look like this isn't going to work. But we can *try*. We have nothing to lose, and I'm sick of moving from place to place!' she pointed down at the four people. 'But trust me, they're not all out to hurt us. The man there, he helped us. If it wasn't for him, we would all still be trapped.'

The animals all shuffled in quiet surprise.

'I don't know why he's helping us, but all I know is, we need to do something!'

The animals stirred, their confidence rising with her words.

'Remember, on my signal, guide him to the oak!' she pointed at the spindly man. 'He's the *surveyor*,' she said, remembering the letter.

'Go!'

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Beth looked hopefully up at the owl box as she continued her lecture. Rory had told her to stall, so she has started with the history of oak trees. When she had run out of ideas, she moved to the history of the garden; her family history; and now, finally, history in general. But Barry was growing impatient.

'Hah, yes, thank you ever so much for that...enlightening talk. But shall we commence with the formalities? If you can see no reason why this site should not be suitable...?' Barry said happily, patting his folder and placing his hand on the spindly man's back, guiding him back up toward the house.

But the spindly man had stopped dead.

He pointed at the sky.

Everyone followed his gaze.

What seemed like an enormous swarm of bees had risen above the tree line.

They watched in silent, dumbstruck awe as the swarm of bees drew closer, and closer, until it became clear that they were not bees at all, but birds.

'HA! The birds!' shouted Beth, clapping her hands together as the swarm ignored her and Rory completely, and began to circle Barry and the surveyor like a feathery tornado. The spindly man was already making his way off, running leggily with his briefcase held over his head as bird poo began to rain, splattering against the cheap leather. Barry had calmly stepped under the cover of the oak, taken his leather glove from his utility jacket, slipped it on, and whistled.

The spindly man was nearly at the edge of the field being dive bombed by the Dunnocks, the Tit family and BB, when they suddenly lifted off and looped back towards the oak tree. The surveyor relaxed, believing himself to be in the clear. Then, he stopped again.

Kit was running full pelt alongside her speeding Pa. They were flanked by Pheasant, who was flanked by three other pheasants, who were themselves flank-flanked by young Badger, Hodge and his four cubs. Following them were a good smattering of mice, voles, a couple of rabbits, and the guinea pig, who wasn't sure what she had gotten herself in to, but was enjoying it enormously.

Their plan was not to catch the surveyor, but to guide him. With everyone's focus on the swarm of birds, Pigeon had flown unnoticed over the heads of the four humans and landed in the oak tree. Trying not to drip too much white paint on the branches, he hopped neatly into the owl box, and waited.

The spindly man was faster than Kit had anticipated. He dodged and weaved left and right, swinging his briefcase at the pheasants and aiming wild, leggy kicks at the small rodents that snaked in and out of his long legs.

*'He mustn't make it out of the field'* Kit called back to the group as they guided the surveyor like sheepdogs on a farm. 'He needs to see Pigeon!'



Then, Kit was bowled over and felt a sharp pain in her side. K shrieked, and wheeled back above her, high up into the sky, readying to dive once more.

Everyone scattered. The mice and voles went to ground, and Hodge hastened his cubs to cover. The Guinea pig, realising it had bitten off more than it could chew, disappeared with the others. Only the pheasants, Kit and Pa were left. It all seemed lost.

Kit limped behind Pheasant who pecked wildly at K as Pa launched himself as high into the air as he could. K cackled and shrieked, dodging the blow with ease.

Suddenly the spindly man stumbled and fell forwards on to the ground. He got to his knees quickly, but he didn't stand. Instead, he began to shake visibly. Without the strength to scream, he let out a small, hoarse, terrified whisper.

*'R-r-r....RAT.'*

Directly in front of him, the head of an enormous brown rat had popped its head up through the ground and was staring curiously at the surveyor. Then, it disappeared. An instant later, the ground underneath them began to tremble slightly. From the hole left by the large rat, what seemed like a dark brown river suddenly erupted. Rats exploded into the field, surrounding the surveyor, clambering over his shiny work shoes and his briefcase and nipping at his heels as he leapt three feet into the air and began to run in wild, desperate circles.

'Wheredya want 'im?'

Kit jumped. Standing beside her was a sleek, officious looking rat.

'Er, I...what?'

'At your service!' the rat beamed. Kit looked at him, baffled.

'We're on strike! Ever since you and your robot bird broke in,' the rat gestured to Pheasant, who saluted, 'we all agreed to revolt against exploitative work practices, workplace safety and pay...'

Pheasant nodded knowingly. Pa panted.

'So, what shall we do with him?' Asked the rat foreman again, as they watched the spindly man trying, and failing, to escape, as K dived ineffectively at the shoal.

'erm, well, over there, if you could?!' Kit pointed to the step ladder that leant up against the oak tree. The rat nodded quickly, placed a paw between his teeth, and whistled.

The pile of rats stopped as one, and all looked in his direction. The officious rat waved a paw twice. The rats instantly formed a long, wide semi-circle in front of the spindly man. Then they began to scuttle forward. The spindly man, wondering if he was stuck in a nightmare, didn't need to be asked twice; he turned on his heel and sprinted back towards the oak tree, clambered up the ladder, and only stopped when he could climb no higher, his path blocked by a large, wooden owl box. The rats surrounded the base of the oak, awaiting further instructions.

Kit and Pheasant took cover, thanking the lead rat, who whistled again and once more disappeared into the ground. The shoal of rats around the tree all moved off as one.

Barry, who had been watching with his arms folded, shook his head and tutted. K landed back on his arm with a dull thud.

'Well, aha! Quite a show.'

The spindly man climbed gingerly down the ladder, and Barry hurried to help him from the bottom rung, 'Nevertheless, I hardly think a bit of common wildlife is hardly a matter for us to worry about, isn't that right, erm, Mr...?'

The surveyor straightened his suit and brushed himself down, trying to regain some dignity.

'Well...no, quite...a simple pest control survey may be needed...' he said quietly. Barry grinned at Beth and Rory.

'However. I did see something that looked very like a nesting Barn owl.' He looked up at the box.

Barry's face turned grey.

'HA! A barn owl, hear that old Baz?! You can't disturb an Owl nest, now even you know that!' Beth grinned, drumming her fists happily against the oak tree.

'Of course, I'll have to have a wildlife inspector come as soon as possible to verify it,' the spindly man continued wearily, still shaking with the stress of the afternoon.

'And how long might that take?' Barry said, through gritted teeth.

'Only a few weeks-'

'Weeks?!' Barry spluttered, his face reddening with anger. He looked up at the box.

'Well, we'll see about that!'

Barry thrust his arm into the air. K lifted and shot like a bullet up into the oak tree, before Beth had time to protest. Barry kicked the ladder over and stood on it, staring menacingly at Rory.

'Well, don't you look *lovely*,' said K, hopping into the owl box and cocking a head at the newly painted Pigeon. 'I'm awfully sorry to ruin your little stunt, but the party's over...'

K unfurled a lazy wing and invited Pigeon to leave.

But Pigeon had turned to face him. K faltered. Pigeon was scratching at the floor of the box with one pink foot, like a small white bull.

'Now, this can go one of two ways. The easy...the... wait a--' K began to scabble backwards, as Pigeon charged.

Down below the oak tree, the four people saw the owl box shake and shudder for a moment, and then, with a pop, watched with amazement as a Kestrel flew backwards out of the small hole with a flurry of white feathers.

K returned sheepishly to Barry's arm. Barry offered no meat, roughly pushing the birds' hood onto its head.

'Well! I think that about settles it. Looks like a nesting Barn defending its territory to me, eh lad, in your, erm, expert opinion?' Beth nudged Rory.

'Oh, yes. No doubt, absolutely!'

Barry frothed with rage. Then his eyes caught sight of a white feather falling to the ground. It fell a lot faster than a normal feather. He picked it up, and turned it over, peered closely and felt the texture.

Fortunately, before he thought to climb the ladder himself, they were interrupted for the third time that day. This time, it was Rory's turn to grin. He pointed to the entrance of the field behind the oak, where a crowd of some thirty people were walking arm in arm.

Beth looked inquisitively at Rory.

'Social media!' he laughed.

Beth frowned, 'Who?'

Rory took Beth by the arm and lead her to the trunk of the tree, where he linked his arm into hers as the crowd joined, surrounding the oak. A young, red-haired woman in a high-vis jacket stood at the front. She picked up the megaphone that was strapped to her side and took one defiant step forward.

*'TREES ARE?'*

Barry and the spindly man jumped backwards as the crowd responded.

*'NOT-FOR-SALE!'*

'Now, hold on...a...moment' Barry stumbled, tripping over his own feet as he tried to scramble away from the determined crowd, 'there.... there are, you can't simply-'

*'TREES ARE?'*

*'NOT-FOR-SALE!'*

*'WHO'S TREES?'*

*'NOT YOURS!'*

*'TREES ARE?'*

*'NOT FOR SALE!'*

They began to step forward, all united, all linked, and as they moved, the swarm of birds erupted above the treeline again, and dived once more at the spindly man, who was already making his way off as the crowd grew louder, running leggily back towards the road for a final time. The crowd continued to surge, and Barry scrambled back, all the way to the hedge that divided the two gardens. He crashed through it, and the crowd cheered. The leader of the group held up a hand.

It was then that Rory remembered.

He gulped, crossed over to the red-haired woman and hurriedly asked her something against the din of the still chanting crowd. She smiled and thrust out her megaphone to him. Rory would have gulped again, but his throat was now completely dry.

'Erm...Hello?!' His voice cracked slightly into the small white and orange megaphone.

The crowd cheered.

'This, erm...might sound a little strange!'  
The crowd cheered again.

'But...you're all from the local town or village?'

A bigger cheer than ever erupted and a small old lady shouted 'THUUMBSBY!'

Erm, well...' Rory continued, 'have any of you lost a mobile phone, in the last few weeks?'

This time the cheer was a quieter and a little disjointed as the crowd murmured in confusion.

Rory persevered.

'Well, if you have a new phone, and you know your old number...could you call your old phone...please?'

There was something of an awkward silence as the crowd looked at one another, then to their leader for judgement on this slightly strange young man. The red-haired woman took out her own phone, typed in a number, and held it to her ear. Many in the crowd followed suit.

'Now, shhhhhhhhhhhhh!' Rory hissed through the megaphone.

He waited. He was either about to look very silly, or very intelligent.

To his relief, floating over the hedge into the quiet sunlit garden, came the unmistakable sound:

'Dum, DuDuDumdumDumdumDumDumDumDum. Dum ,

DuDuDumDumDumDumDumDumDumDum...'

The crowd didn't need to be asked. They surged forward, forming a line that spilled through the gap in the hedge, following the fleeing Barry and the sound of ringing. They surrounded the hide, where the noise was loudest, and stopped.

'Now wait a minute!' Barry stamped on the floor, 'This-is-*Private*-property!' He wagged his finger. 'I suggest you bunch of jobless hippies move away now or I will be forced to call the authorities! I'll have -'

'No need for that!'

A tall, lolling figure made his way through the crowd. The policeman had been quietly drinking from his thermos, sitting on a portable chair some distance away. He was always happy to be sent to local environmental protests, which usually consisted of a few dancing old ladies dressed as dolphins, a lot of biodegradable glitter that he had to politely decline to cover his hat in, and people lying down in roads that only had two buses a day, except on Sundays, where there weren't any at all. When the strange young man had started talking about stolen property and the crowd had surged, he was forced to put the soduko away, and investigate.

'Officer, these *people* – if you can call them that,' spat Barry, as the crowd made an 'OOooo' sound, 'are quite blatantly *trespassing!*' The policeman tucked his hat between his under arm and ribcage and held up his hand. Silence gradually fell. Rory crossed his arms and stood next to the policeman, glaring out at the crowd.

'Now, sir, ladies and gentlemen, this can one of two ways, see. Either you move aside, and allow me through, or I shall have to arrest, erm, all of you.'

The crowd cheered. Barry shook with indignation. The policeman pointed to a hatch, from which the noise seemed to be coming.

'Could you kindly open this door, please, sir'.

Barry hesitated. Then he reluctantly removed his phone from the top pocket of his camouflage vest and jabbed the screen. The door slid open, and the policeman peered inside. Handing his hat to Barry, he squeezed his rather large frame through the door.

After what seemed like a long time he emerged again, carrying two large evidence bags bulging with still ringing mobile phones.

'I think, sir,' said the officer, climbing out with difficulty, 'that you ought to come to the station with me.'

The crowd cheered.

Barry held up a hand, 'now, officer, there is a simple explanation. It's actually an incredible scientific discovery -'

'I'm sure it is, sir,' the policeman nodded knowingly as he took Barry by the arm and began to lead him away.

'What are you- wait...you don't understand! The animals, they can be controlled – it's a trap, listen to me!' Barry caught sight of Rory and pointed wildly, 'he knows! Him, there, he knows all about it. Tell them!'

The policeman paused. He looked expectantly at Rory. Rory looked at Beth, and the crowd. Then he shrugged.

'I'm really sorry, but I'm just a reporter.' He said, tapping his camera with Barry's plastic business card.

The policeman touched his hat to Rory and the crowd, and carried on leading the still protesting Barry away. The crowd cheered a final time.

A while later Rory made his way over to Beth, who was sitting on a fallen log wiping her brow, having thanked and waved off the last of the jubilant protesters with promises to attend their next meeting, definitely sign up to the newsletter and make *sure* she was free on the fourteenth for the cake sale.

'That's quite enough excitement for one day,' she smiled, tearing the contract in two, and stuffing it in her pocket. She sighed.

'What is it?' said Rory, noticing at Beth's sober expression as she watched the last of the crowd making their way back across the field.

'Well, I don't know! It's just, I'm not getting any younger.'

'Jacobs!'

Rory looked up. His boss was striding toward them. Rory closed his eyes.

'What did you do? I saw your article, "150-year-old oak tree", "Wildlife haven?" What are you playing at?! You logged into my page and *deliberately* misrepresented the paper.

You're-'

'Don't bother!' Rory interrupted, standing up suddenly. ' He shoved his work phone into his boss's hand, who stumbled backwards, 'I quit!

His boss straightened his tie, and snorted.

'Well, well. I knew I was right about you! I should never have offered you an unpaid internship! That's you *finished*. You mark my words, I'll see to it that you never work in a bi-monthly local town newspaper, *ever again*.' He straightened his tie again unnecessarily, and began to stride huffily back to his car, stumbling slightly in his tight, shiny shoes.

Rory sat back down. Beth held out her fist, and he bumped it.

They sat for a while, breathing in the quiet left by the afternoon commotion, watching as the sun dipped over the field and another evening drew in around the old oak tree.

Eventually, Beth looked Rory up and down.

'I suppose you're unemployed now?'

'Thanks' said Rory. Beth laughed.

'Well. What about it?'

Beth opened her arms to the garden in front of her. The grass was taller than in years gone by, the fences that kept the deer out were hanging uncertainly, and the stream was clogged with fallen sticks and leaves leftover from autumn.

'Gardener! Full-time. You can live in the annex and help me around the place.'

Rory sat quietly for a while.

'But I don't know anything about gardening.'

Beth waved away this suggestion impatiently, 'Nobody *knows* anything, until they do it. You'll pick it up. Point is, do you want to?'

Rory looked at Beth, then out again at the beautiful, rolling garden. He had to admit, ever since the first time he had visited, he had not been able to get it out of his mind.



Rory put out his fist, and Beth bumped it.

### **Chapter 10: A Misunderstanding**

Pigeon fidgeted angrily. The paint, it turned out, was more difficult to get off than they had anticipated. Despite numerous bird baths and a miserable day sat atop the tall redwood in the driving rain, he was still emitting a distinctly pale glow. It itched. He muttered angrily as he rubbed against the coarse wall of the wooden box, trying to sand himself down.

'Bleedin birds...and squirrels...makin' plans....slast time I listern to a bunch of...'

Behind him, there was a thud, and a rustle of wings.

'Perhaps I could be...of assistance?'

The large, white Barn Owl winked both enormous black eyes, bowed gracefully and stepped toward Pigeon. 'I give a *fantastic* head massage.' Pigeon backed away slowly.

'Now you listen ere....'

Days later, once Pigeon had finally gotten the paint off and the misunderstanding had been cleared up, the Owl wasn't put off or embarrassed. He decided he liked the look of the place. At first, the small animals, the mice, voles and shrews, as well as the birds, were alarmed that the Owl planned to stick around and wait for a real mate. When they realised he was *extremely* short sighted, and had taken a good deal of convincing that Pigeon was in fact a pigeon, they had fully supported the decision. K, whose reputation had been irrevocably damaged when the story of his fight with Pigeon made the rounds, soon left the garden with the news. Barry, on completing two weeks community service, soon moved out of Thumbsby, unable to convince the surveyor to return, who himself also soon changed career path, deciding that the countryside wasn't for him.

Kit held a large nut between her paws, nibbling it happily. She looked down at the cacophony of birds that flitted around the bulging feeders swaying once more amongst the apples. There were in fact more seeds than ever; the young man who had helped Kit escape refilled them every morning, before tottering around the garden, carrying loads too heavy for

him, scratching himself on thorns, tripping over and getting tangled in various weeds. Still, he seemed to be enjoying himself. The birds remained distrustful of the squirrels, but Pigeon had taken it upon himself to act as envoy, making certain that a fair share of the feed remained leftover. Largely, both kept themselves to themselves. Pa still watched too much of the screen, but Beth had finally put a password on her Wi-Fi, and turned it off regularly, telling anyone who visited that 'You Never-Can-Be-Too-Careful about who was trying to steal your data these days'. She wasn't sure what that meant, but it seemed to work fine. And, for the first time since moving, Pa had started joining Kit for a morning climb.

'Kit!!!'

Pheasant desperately waved a wing from far below the beech tree.

'Everything OK?' said Kit, pausing to stand up on her hind legs and peer down at the agitated bird.

'OKAY? Better than O-K-A-Y. I just saw the BIGGEST caterpillar.'

Pa looked wearily at Kit.

'Only, it...seems to have gotten away from me,' Pheasant called, looking earnestly around at the floor.

'I think it went this way - come on!' Pheasant crashed into a nearby bush and didn't emerge from the other side. Kit slid down the smooth trunk of the beech, hopped across to the thinnest branch, vaulted over to the neighbouring oak, and leapt down to follow her friend.