

# The End of Longtails

Short Space Stories From Orb Central Library

THE MADMIN CAVES

By Daily Florence

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Dedicated to Felix & Graihagh xxx

# THE MESSAGE

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

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

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

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

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

If you are reading this then it means that somebody on Earth has found my moments that I saved from Orb Central Library and sent down the path. Please send help. My name is Denver Longtail and

I was a communicator who lived at 4A Whispering Lane, Orb Central City, Planet Orb, in the far reaches of the Canis Major Dwarf Galaxy. I was a librarian at the Orb Central Library who lived to seek, recall and record and these are my moments, in fact, they are the only moments to now exist, there is nothing left, the Universe is gone.”

# PROLOGUE

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

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

'A pen, do you have a pen?'

'Y, yes.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*What the hell was I on?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My cheese scale slid down slightly but I forged on.

'As employees of Orb Central Library, it will be your responsibility to seek, recall and record the truth. Together, with me as your team leader, we will fight the biggest threat to the moments of Orb and our inhabitants: fake news. It is our job to ensure that only truthful moments that take place on planet Orb are published and submitted to our precious Orb Central Library collection so that they can exist for all of eternity. Now, talking of fake news,

I could give you some examples, but how about you share with us some of your own stories and how that has affected you personally. That would be much more exciting. Anyone?'

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

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

'You mean Moomoo?' said the Buffalo.

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

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

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

I mean, where did I start?

She'd only been going to two weeks. Why did no one else at the Deer's house eat? How come she ended up so depressed? How did she eat the house out when she never got out of bed? Someone had to be feeding her? Why didn't they feed themselves at the same time? My brain began to hurt so I decided to break the silence by casually thanking the Deer for his input but, to avoid a scene, chose to ignore the glaring ludicrousness of his story – it was clear that there was going to be a lot of work to be done when it came to that Deer –



but before I could even open my mouth, a vocal eruption of sympathy burst from all of the new recruits and caught me off guard.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Not my fault was it?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

Board of Directors how he knew all along my diversity programme was a terrible idea and how much of a failure I really was.

I felt a second wind coming.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This was terrible, what was I going to do?

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

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

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

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

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

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

## THE CAVE DRAWING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That said, I loved the walk to work every morning, it was the perfect place to gather my thoughts. Unlike Earth, our pale-green skies

twinkled with stars and rolled with creamy clouds during the day. Every morning, the sun would rise over the stone-brick skyline, giving a nod to the animals of Orb to start their day.

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

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

Slowly but surely, the sound of meowing cats in the distance fell into earshot. I stopped dead in my tracks and watched as every animal in the street came to a standstill, listening on with ears perked and wide eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Shut up. Will everyone just shut up for a moment.' I raised my ears and tried again, the faint meows in the distance were getting

louder. 'They've found something in the Madmin caves. A body of a human dra...'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'That's the wrong information. Take that down now.'

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

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

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

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

Almost immediately his news stand quietened.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I screamed silently to myself.

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