

An odd thing about humans, thought Tick as he thrust his spade into the soil for the yumptenth time that afternoon, was their smell. Or rather the fact they didn't have one. How was it possible to go through life without a smell?

Tick (*he with no time to waste*) stopped digging and gazed around at the fungusatory – the walls of the cavern towering high, its jagged ceiling dimly lit by fireflies. On the cavern floor around him, dozens of hefty yeti milled about in the gloom – digging up soil, spreading new spores, turning over compost heaps. Even in the murk, Tick could still make out the unease on their shaggy faces. Worry hung over the fungus farm like a rain cloud.

Word had it that a group of humans had set up their cocoons beside the river, not a thousand strides from the sett. Humans rarely came this far north, and their sudden

arrival had sent everyone into a spin. Yeti knew to stay well clear of people, as sure as eating pine cones gave you wind – or at least that's what every yeti learned.

But Tick's mother must have known something different. When he was just a fledgling, she crossed paths with humans – in broad daylight – and never even tried to deny it. The elders swiftly banished her, and the weight of disgrace still hung around Tick's neck like a boulder. No one even uttered his mum's name any more. She had become *she of whom no one speaks*. The mother Tick remembered was good, and kind, and true. If she had been with humans, there must have been a good reason.

And now humans were right here on the mountain.

Just go and look at them, a little fly of an idea buzzed in his head. *Maybe you'll find answers?*

Tick swatted it away. He kneeled down and, with gentle fingers, harvested a handful of tiny fungi, lifting them out and placing them in his basket. With the basket now full, Tick got up and tied the handle to one of the vines dangling from the ceiling. He gave the vine a soft tug and watched as the basket rose to the tunnels above, to be collected by Scatterer Yeti and dispersed on the forest floor and beyond.

It was always the same in the fungusatory, thought Tick. Each yeti in their place, like ants in a nest, their movements steady and methodical – spreading fungi into

the world. Just like it was in his father's time, and his father's before him. Tick tried to remember his father but it was hopeless – his dad had passed on before Tick had even learned to walk. What had he made of life down here? There had to be more to the world than growing and picking fungi.

"Hey, Tick," came a voice in his ear, breaking him from his thoughts. It was Plumm (*she sweet on the outside with hard centre*). Plumm was on watering duty, lugging a bucket. "Did you hear the news – it's all over the farm – there are humans on the mountain!"

"I heard." Tick tried to sound unconcerned.

"Oh yeah, humans within striding distance and Tick isn't interested," Plumm teased. She put down her bucket and parted the soft fur on her cheeks and found a nit, popping it in her mouth. "What do you think they're up to?"

Tick shrugged. "I doubt it's good."

"Humaans, we have nooo smell..." Plumm moaned, raising her hands and reaching for his throat, her face twisted into a grimace.

Tick laughed, raising his hands too. "We waaant to find your setttt!" he wailed.

A shout came from across the fungusatory. "You two, back to work!" It was Nagg (*he who pesters*), the fungusatory elder. Tick could see him over by the waterwheel, talking to Dahl, Guardian of the Sett. They

were probably discussing the human situation.

Dahl (*he who smells the fiercest*) was taller and wider than any yeti in the fungusatory, with great shoulders, and arms like tree trunks. In one hand, he held the mighty Rumble Stick – the Guardian's staff, worn smooth by generations of hands. Dahl's neck was thick, and his mammoth head rose into a slight cone shape.

"Better hop to it," said Plumm, lifting her bucket.

Tick bent down and picked up his spade again, pausing at the sight of a large and rather poisonous-looking centipede burrowing back down into the soil. He grabbed hold and showed the wriggling bug to Plumm.

"Want half?"

Plumm shook her head as she wandered off. "All yours."

"Suit yourself," said Tick, munching.

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The message soon got round the farm that Greatrex was having emergency speaks about the humans in the grub hall before the naming custom that evening. Greatrex the wise, keeper of the carvings, silverback of the sett (*he who knows most*).

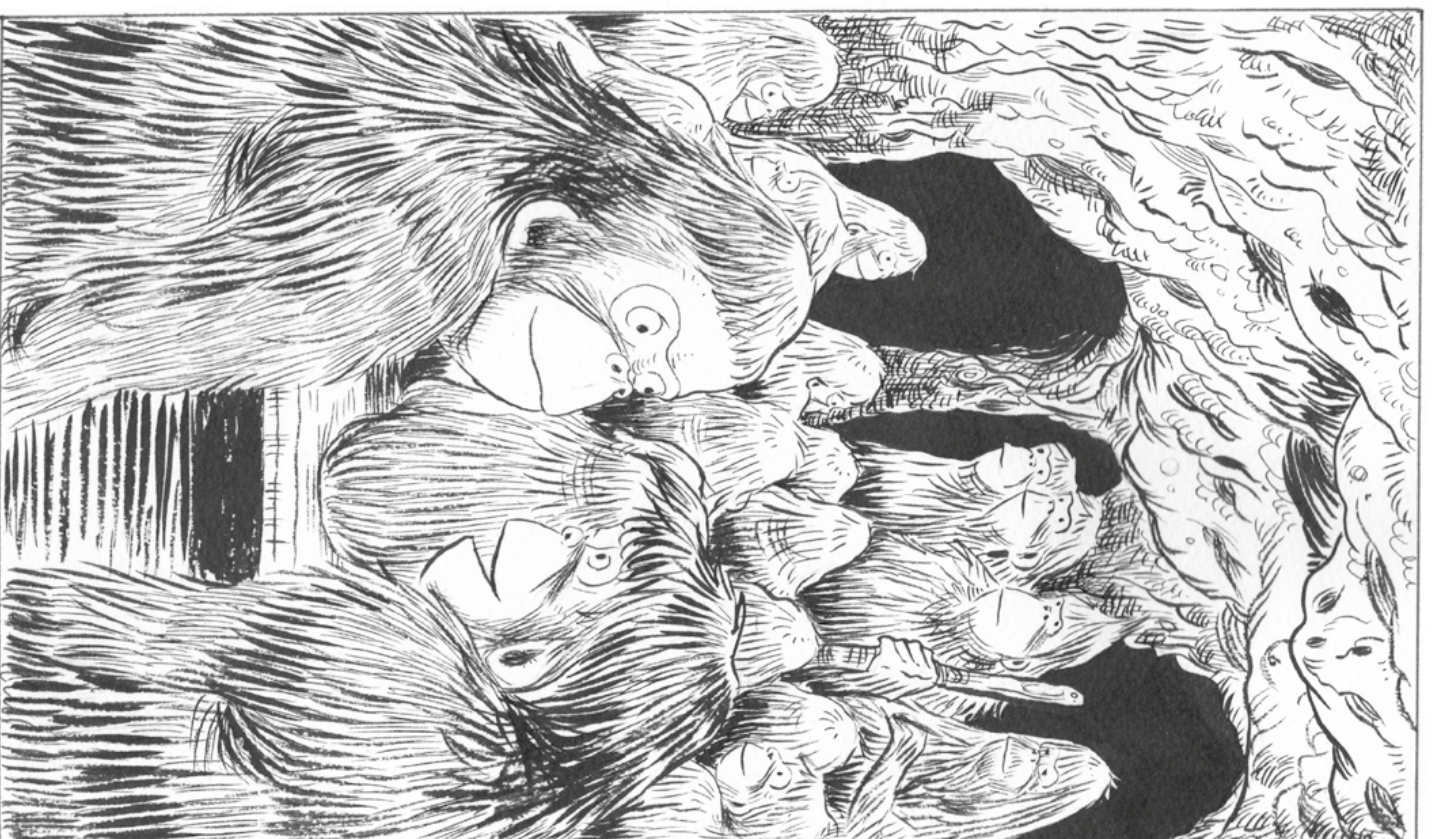
When the final horn sounded soon after, Tick dumped his tools and, when he couldn't find Plumm anywhere, he mumbled a quiet goodbye to some of the others, and padded out of the fungusatory and into the passageway.

The tunnel climbed to the upper part of the sett, Tick following the signs back towards the yeti dens, though he could have found his way blindfolded. He stopped in his den to wash his hands and face, gave himself a quick run-over with his flea comb and left straight away.

But, when he got to the grub hall, he saw that all the benches were already full. Every yeti in the sett was there, the cavern full of nervous murmuring. He spied Plumm waving at him from the far end of the cavern, her nut-brown eyes dancing with excitement.

"I saved you a spot," she mouthed. Tick went over and sat down, giving her shoulder a fond pat. His best friend was always looking out for him. Plumm was an orphan too – she knew what it felt like.

At the head of the cavern sat the elders: Greatrex, with Dahl ever present at his right hand, joined by Nagg and the others from the Council of Elders: Lintt, Slopp and Gruff. In front of them, resting on a bed of moss, were the precious slabs. As ancient as the mountains, as ancient as the world itself. Chiselled into the heavy rock blocks, in flowery, old-fashioned yeti script, were the yeti laws. These were the words and history that guided every yeti deed. Legend said the Earth Mother set the laws in stone in the time of darkness, and passed them down to each of her children. Tick learned to listen to the slabs almost before he'd had a chance to break his first wind.



Written in the carvings was the tale of how Earth Mother sent her children out into the world. They spoke of the yeti known as Almas who went north to the land of the high plateau. They were tall and mighty – their legs long, their fur as red as earth. To them fell the duty to protect snow mammals. To the west were the Barmanou, guardians of mountains and glaciers. Across wide oceans were the Bigfoot – carers of mangroves and wetlands – and the Mono Grande, keepers of the toads. In steamy jungles lived the Mande Barung, growers of medicinal plants, and the Orang Pendek with their long hair, the protectors of tigers and forests. They were all there, carved in stone – twenty sets, their tales written in the old writing.

But now there were only nineteen left and the story behind that was drummed into every youngling. How one of Earth Mother's children abandoned her slabs – the one called human. And now, many cycles later, she didn't even look like a yeti at all. Humans had lost most of their fur and they didn't have a smell beyond the mildest whiff. They had even forgotten how to tree-stride.

So why had Tick's mum tangled with them?

You need to find out, buzzed the idea fly.

"Stop pestering," answered Tick aloud.

"What did you say?" asked Plumm beside him.

"Nothing."

Dahl thumped the floor with his great staff just once and the hall fell silent. Silent apart from the constant growing and rumbling of dozens of yeti stomachs.

Greatrex rose to his feet, his silver hair long and his face as dark as night itself. He touched his hand to his chest, and then to his head. The yeti stood as one and returned his greeting. Greatrex waited for the gathering to take their seats again. He rested his hands on the slabs as he spoke, as if gaining strength from their wisdom.

"Malodorous yeti, before the joyous naming custom begins, we must turn our thoughts to a serious matter." Greatrex peered over the gathered throng to make sure they were listening. "No doubt you've all caught wind of humans coming to the mountain. Dahl, with his own eyes, discovered them from a distance yesternoon." This brought a round of anxious burbling.

Greatrex silenced the crowd once more. "It is written that, long ago, people and yeti were one and the same. But not now. Humans want to hunt us down, find our sets and expose us to their world. Beware: *the toad does not come into sunlight without good reason.*"

There were anxious murmurs of agreement throughout the cavern at the silverback's words.

Greatrex raised his hand. "I'm putting the sett on the hush. The mountain is out of bounds. No tree-striding, no foraging, no rummaging, no mooching, no wandering –

not so much as a stroll. So it is written in the slabs. Hear me as I speak.”

Again the cavern filled with grumbles.

Flabb (*he with stomach like boulder*) raised a long, hairy arm. “But what of our grub? What will we eat?” He patted his enormous bulk and there were worried noises from some of the others.

Greatrex raised his hand. “Rest easy. The kitchen assures me that even after tonight’s feast we will have enough grub to last us more than a few moons.” He nodded over at Nosh (*she who makes nibbles*) in her apron. “And tomorrow Dahl will lead a collecting team on a secret gathering trip. We shall draw stalks.”

Greatrex held up a hollow tree stump filled with grass stalks. Each one was marked with the scent of a yeti in the sett.

“I hope it’s not either of us,” Plumm whispered but Tick’s fingers drummed on his knee, over and over.

“*Pick me!*” they said. “*Pick me!*”

Greatrex shook the tree stump, rattling the stalks, and then drew out the first one.

Dahl ran it underneath his large, wide nostrils. “Dulle,” he announced (*she with blank stare*), followed by Gabb (*she who prattles*) and Itch (*he with skin complaint*).

Dahl took the final stalk and breathed in. “Tick,” he intoned at last.

Tick’s head buzzed. *Now you can go and see the humans for yourself,* said the idea fly. *You know that’s why you wanted to be chosen.*

You think I should? thought Tick.

“Let the naming custom begin!” Greatrex commanded, to loud cheers from the crowd.

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Once the guard yeti had returned the slabs to the council chambers, helpers brought sacks full of green pine needles into the hall and placed them round the room.

At the front of the cavern stood a small yeti, her youngling coat barely sprouted, holding her parents’ hands, her eyes fixed on the floor. Tick felt for her. He remembered just how jittery he’d been at his own naming.

There was a fanfare of yodelling as Retch (*he with upset tummy*) marched into the hall, his arms outstretched like wings, a piece of wood in one hand, a blindfold of moss around his eyes. “Greetings, sweet-smelling beasts!” Retch bellowed. “I implore you – begin the needling!”

At this, the yeti swarmed round the sacks of pine needles, grabbing handfuls of the sharp green leaves and hurling them at Retch. A green cloud filled the cavern as more and more needles flew through the air. They stuck to Retch’s hair as they fell, covering his head, his arms and

his chest until there wasn't a single bit of the yeti visible. A couple of eager younglings picked up a sack and poured the contents over his head.

Then Dahl thumped the cavern floor with his Rumble Stick again, and the commotion died down. Retch stood there, arms still outstretched, blanketed in green. He had become the green creature spoken of in the carvings – he was the Leaf Yeti. The bringer of names.

Tick saw the worried youngling cowering at the sight of him.

“Hail the Leaf Yeti,” commanded Greatrex.

“Hail!” replied the cavern.

“I have the naming bark,” announced the Leaf Yeti. He held the piece of wood above his head to great cheers. The youngling’s mother came up to receive it.

“What says the bark?”

The mother read, “She who picks the best fruit.”

The Leaf Yeti thought for a moment. “Come forth, youngling,” he ordered. The small yeti shuffled forward. The Leaf Yeti placed his hand on her head. “From this moon forth you shall be known as Pluk, *she who picks the best fruit.*”

“Greetings, Pluk!” shouted Tick, Plumm and the others. Now the cavern broke into great yodelling:

*“She has her own name, she has her own na-a-a-me!
Pluk the yeti, she has her own name!”*

Pluk gave an uncertain smile and waved at the crowd, while her parents accepted the congratulations of nearby well-wishers. There was applause all round as the Leaf Yeti took his seat at the head of the cavern.

“Yeti, without further delay, let us feast!” announced Greatrex.