

THE ENLIGHTENMENT ADVENTURES * BOOK ONE

PERSIMMON TAKES ON HUMANITY



CHRISTOPHER LOCKE

PRAISE FOR *PERSIMMON TAKES ON HUMANITY*

“Not only is *Persimmon Takes On Humanity* a riveting read, but it also tackles one of the most important issues of our time with poignancy and heart.”

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“Powerful, captivating and inspiring! By the time you turn the last page, this book will have changed your life.”

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“Christopher Locke takes young adult fiction in a bold, new direction with his novel *Persimmon Takes On Humanity*. Anyone who loves animals will cheer Persimmon, the plucky raccoon, and her friends in their quest to rescue animals from industrialized cruelty. I hope that readers will pick up this book, learn from it and perhaps adopt Persimmon’s valiant crusade as their own.”

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“With colorful characters and an enthralling story, *Persimmon Takes On Humanity* is not only enjoyable to read, but it might just change your view of humankind, and of the world that we have created.”

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For all the remarkable people out there who are working tirelessly to make the world a more compassionate place. You inspire me.

For all the critters of the world who are suffering at the hands of humans. I humbly wish that the words contained within this book will somehow, one day bring you peace.

For my brilliant wife. You set the standard for what a true partner and soul mate should be. Your creative input on this book was invaluable and your infinite support has made my dreams come true. In return... Everything. All my life. For you.

1



PERSIMMON IS FEELING restless. Her black-and-brown-striped tail bounces eagerly back and forth as she anticipates her next daring move. She scopes out the branches on the evergreen tree across from her, which are glistening in the moonlight. Can she make the leap?

Derpoke sees the determined look in his raccoon friend's eyes and immediately speaks up. "Persimmon, don't!"

Persimmon peers down at the opossum—her more cautious companion—on the branch below her. "What? You don't think I can make it?"

"I know you want me to say, no, so that you can prove me wrong, but I'm not going to fall for your foolish game."

"Come on," Persimmon baits him. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"That's what you said to get me to climb so high in this tree," Derpoke scoffs. "Be sensible."

Just then, Persimmon's sprightly—and tinier—brother, Scraps, rushes headfirst down the tree trunk and stops with perfect accuracy just above her. Unlike his sister, whose fur is mostly brown with a sprinkle of gray, Scraps is all gray. Both of them, though, have the classic black raccoon mask around their eyes—perfectly fitting for their mischievous natures.

"Did I hear you say adventure?" Scraps jumps in excitedly.

“What is it with you two and adventure?” Derpoke questions, exasperated. “Adventure does not mean risking your life.”

Persimmon’s eyes light up. “But the risk sure makes it exhilarating.”

“If raccoons were meant to fly from tree to tree, you would have wings instead of legs,” Derpoke chides.

Persimmon shoots Derpoke a devilish grin. “Oh, really.”

“Persimmon, don’t twist my words to justify your whims,” Derpoke scolds. “You’re going to get hurt. Please!”

Scraps hops up and down. “A challenge! A challenge!”

Persimmon inches her way backward toward the trunk of the tree. It’s an official dare. How can she turn back now?

She digs her claws into the bark. Derpoke quickly lifts himself up onto the branch where she sits, blocking her path. He holds his pink paws out to stop her. She is larger than he is, though, so he isn’t much of an imposing force. “You can make it, Persimmon. Okay? I believe you. So now there’s nothing to prove. Come on, let’s see how many raspberries we can eat before our stomachs start to ache.”

Persimmon digs her claws deeper into the branch. She takes a steady breath. She is so focused on the jump, it’s as if she is looking right through him. At this point, his pleading will be in vain.

Derpoke slumps down onto the branch below and turns the other way. “I won’t watch. I can’t bear to see my best friend jump to her death.”

Persimmon races forward. Faster and faster. The edge of the branch is nearing. Can she make it? The gap between the trees seems to be getting wider and wider as she gets closer. Faster, faster... there’s no stopping now! The end of the branch bends down with her weight, which slows her pace dramatically. She keeps running forward, but now she is facing down instead of straight—she’ll be jumping directly at the ground. She presses her hind legs hard into the branch and pushes off with all her might. Derpoke, who has just turned to watch, lets out a frightened squeal.

Persimmon falls quick and hard. Her heart is racing so rapidly, it hurts. Fear overcomes her. The branches of the next tree are not coming closer, but the ground surely is. Down, down she falls. She reaches out for a branch, but it zips through her claws. The ground is getting closer. Pine needles sting and slap her masked face. She wildly flings her paws around, trying to clasp onto anything that would break her fall.

Her body crashes against a flimsy tree limb, knocking the wind out of her. She wraps all four legs around the branch, clinging for dear life. She struggles to breathe. The tree limb bends down and then swings her back up into the air. She tries to hold on, but the force bouncing upward is too much. She flies into the air and loses her grip. She flails around before landing with a thud on a bed of dandelions.

Scraps bolts down the tree trunk toward his sister at lightning speed.

“Persimmon!” Derpoke screams, lowering himself as fast as his stubby legs will go, which is agonizingly slow for the distressed opossum. He finally waddles up to her and clasps her limp paw. “No, no. Be alive. Be alive.”

The night is silent. Derpoke lets out a gasp and rests his pink nose on her paw.

Just then, Persimmon sucks in a giant gulp of air. She opens her eyes. She moans. Every inch of her body aches.

Derpoke lets out a sigh of relief. “Are you broken?”

Persimmon turns to him with a smile. “Told you.”

Persimmon and Scraps playfully kick their back paws together, and Scraps dances on his hind legs in jubilation. “The winner!”

Derpoke pushes her front paw away. “You are the most impossible creature I have ever met. You infuriate me. What if you had died? Huh? What would I do then?”

“You would miss me every day for the rest of your life. You know why?”

“Ha,” Derpoke dismisses her. “I would say you were silly, and...”

“You didn’t answer my question. You know why you’d miss me so much?”

Derpoke starts to scamper away. He knows where this is going. Persimmon rushes up to him and wraps her legs around his body, knocking him to the ground as she squeezes him tightly.

“Because I’m your favorite.” She tickles his belly and kisses his forehead and ears. “Your favorite creature in all the forest and beyond!”

Derpoke tries to wrestle free, but it’s no use against his bigger, stronger friend.

A shadow suddenly forms over the two companions.

“Having fun?” Rawly, an imposing raccoon, stands over them on his hind legs, asserting his dominance. He glares at the playful pair. Derpoke goes limp with fear.

Persimmon lets go of Derpoke and leisurely rolls onto her side to face Rawly. “Well, well, well, if it isn’t Grumpykins.”

“Grumpy?!” Rawly replies, incensed. “How about rightfully annoyed that you’re in my territory—again? You think you can just gallivant around all over my trees?”

“The forest is big enough for all of us to share,” Persimmon responds defiantly. “I’m not intimidated by the silly rules you males force on everyone around you by rubbing your butts on everything.”

Rawly moves closer to Persimmon and whispers sleazily, “It’s nature, and nature tells me that a female coming into my territory wants only one thing.”

Persimmon kicks him away with her hind legs. Derpoke pops out of his frozen stance and glowers at Rawly.

“You’re gross, Rawly,” Persimmon retorts. “Not that it occurred to you, but there are more important things in life than mating.”

“More important? Yes. More interesting? No.” Before Persimmon can snap back at him, Rawly continues. “The most ridiculous thing about you jumping between those trees is that you were doing it to show off to your puny brother and this cowardly opossum.”

Persimmon pops up, indignant. “They both have more heart than all of the other raccoons combined. Besides, I did it to prove to myself that it could be done—and maybe to taste the thrill of it.”

“Huh. Well, if you warriors are so brave, then why don’t you venture past Oak Tree Forest on the other side of the river?” Rawly provokes.

“You’re absurd,” Persimmon jeers. “As if you’re courageous enough to venture there. No raccoon has ever gone past that point and lived to tell the tale.”

“Or so our parents would have us believe.” Rawly pauses for a few moments to let that revelatory thought sink in. Then he laughs to himself. “Don’t be so naïve. Where do you think the older raccoons go when the cold is coming in and food is scarce?”

Persimmon responds without hesitation. “They go to the human burrows that are all lined up in rows on this side of the woods, as we all do. Savvy forest creatures stay away from that side of the river beyond Oak

Tree Forest because it is common knowledge that the humans there are more ferocious. There, the humans force other creatures to carry them around when they are too lazy to walk, they tear off animals' skin and fur and wear them proudly, and they beat animals to death for entertainment."

"Yeah," Scraps chimes in. "Those humans even go around killing us forest dwellers just for the fun of it."

Rawly grins smugly. "All of that is true, and yet I go there regularly to feast on all kinds of tasty treats without being bothered by the likes of you bugs."

Persimmon is unimpressed. "How do we know you've really been there? I could just as easily say I've been there too."

"Solid point," Rawly agrees. "But what if I told you there was a creature there that you had never seen before? Perhaps that would pique your interest?"

Persimmon is silent for a second. Derpoke doesn't like the look in her eyes, but Scraps smiles widely. A creature they've never seen before in a treacherous land? Now *that* sounds like a thrilling adventure.

2



DERPOKE STRUGGLES TO keep up with Persimmon, Scraps and Rawly as they trek through the woods. As if he's been holding the words in for a while, the anxious opossum finally blurts out, "Persimmon, I have a bad feeling about this."

"What harm is it to have a look?" Persimmon replies, slightly annoyed by her friend's endless obsession with caution.

Derpoke perks up. Maybe he can still talk his thrill-seeking friend out of this perilous excursion. "We all just acknowledged that humans there kill animals as entertainment. What if they keep us captive and force us to fight, and then we have to bite each other's faces and swallow each other's noses as they watch and laugh?"

Persimmon stops and turns to Derpoke in shock. "What?! Where do you come up with these disgusting thoughts?"

Derpoke sheepishly lowers his head. "I've heard stories."

"Yes, stories," Persimmon explains. "Maybe our elders made up those stories to keep us away from the best food sources in the area. I mean, think about it, why would any creature be entertained by watching another creature be beaten? Maybe the humans there aren't all that bad. Either way, I won't let anything happen to you."

"I'm not worried about me." Derpoke peers at her earnestly. "I'm worried about you."

Persimmon pats him on the back. "You really are too precious and I love you for it. But stop worrying so much. Just answer me this: Are you

not even the least bit curious to see a creature you never even knew existed?”

“Of course I am,” Derpoke concedes. “I have...”

Before he can finish his thought, Rawly calls out to them from twenty trees away. “Come on, you slugs. We’ll never get there at this pace.”

Derpoke sighs. He knows he’s not winning this one, so he just follows the three raccoons as they travel briskly through the thick brush.

They cross the river using a large fallen tree as a bridge and then hike deep into a part of the woods where Persimmon, Derpoke and Scraps have never dared travel before. The trio is on high alert now that they’re out of known territory. At this point, they can barely contain their bubbling anticipation for what lies ahead.

After walking for what feels like forever, a foul stench suddenly hits their noses.

Persimmon can hardly stand it. “What is that smell?” A vexing thought crosses her mind, and she frowns at Rawly. “Is this a trick? Are you taking us to see some rotting carcass?”

Rawly turns around. “I am not silly enough to play tricks. That is how these creatures smell.”

Derpoke tries to breathe through his mouth instead of his sensitive nose. “Do they not have the decency to lick themselves clean or wade in a stream?”

Rawly pushes ahead. “Come on. We’re close.”

The foursome finally comes upon an incline and they climb it. What they encounter, leaves Persimmon, Derpoke and Scraps momentarily speechless. There is a fenced-in field surrounded by mud. Instead of finding a neighborhood full of houses, which is what they expected to see, there is only one house off in the distance, and in front of that, there is a long, imposing building with a shiny metal roof that reflects the moonlight. But it’s not *what* they see that surprises them the most—it’s the sounds and smell. The odor is the same heavy stench they came upon earlier, but it is so strong now that it burns their keen noses. It smells like a thousand piles of droppings. And the noise that fills the air is a sad mixture of moaning, wailing and weeping. The mysterious creatures inside that long building are suffering.

“Why are they crying?” Scraps whispers to Persimmon.

“I don’t know,” Persimmon replies, concerned. “You know what it reminds me of, though? Remember how I told you that I once came upon a fox who was howling hopelessly with her head caught in a trap?”

Scraps nods.

“It sounds like that,” Persimmon explains.

Derpoke cuts in. “Wait, listen. They’re not just crying. It sounds like they’re saying something.”

All four listen intently to the cries pouring out of the wooden building. Persimmon focuses her hearing on one particular animal and listens ever so carefully. Her heart breaks a little at what she hears. She can just barely make out one word being repeated over and over: “Mommy.”

3



RAWLY SHRUGS. “THESE creatures cry like that every time I come here. So what?”

Persimmon shoots him a nasty look. “How can you be so callous? They’re calling out for their mothers, obviously in pain. Or maybe they’re crying because you’re eating all of their food.”

“Oh please,” Rawly laughs. “They never have any food in there. They just sit in these wooden stalls whining all the time. I eat the food from the main burrow where the humans reside.”

“Well then, have fun gorging on your feast,” Persimmon remarks disdainfully. “I’m going to check on these injured creatures.”

Scraps speaks up. “I’m coming, too.”

Persimmon looks directly at her little brother. “Scraps, it’s too dangerous. If they are hurt, they could be like that fox in the trap and scratch at you even though you’re trying to help them.”

“I didn’t come all this way not to see them.” Scraps holds his ground. “Besides, if they’re in pain, I want to help, too.”

Persimmon gives in. “Fine, but stay close.”

She and Scraps start down the hill. Derpoke turns to Rawly. “Now who’s cowardly?”

Rawly starts to respond, “I’m not afraid of...”

Derpoke doesn’t stay to listen. He rushes to catch up with Persimmon and Scraps. Rawly is left squatting on top of the incline by

himself—feeling foolish, although he keeps his head held high so no one will notice how foolish he feels.

The three critters crawl stealthily through the grass toward the building. No humans are in sight. They hoist themselves onto the wooden fence and when they get to the side of the building, Persimmon notices a hole in the wall up near the roof. She turns to her companions. “Ready?”

Derpoke and Scraps nod.

Persimmon climbs to the hole with ease and peeks her head inside. It’s dark, but her eyes adjust quickly. She examines the interior and sees long rows of narrow wooden enclosures. Inside each one, she can make out shorthaired creatures with white and black patches. She squeezes through the opening for a closer look. Scraps and Derpoke climb the wall and follow close behind.

They scamper along the rafters high above the creatures. The putrid stench is unbearable. Scraps whispers to his sister, “How do they stand this smell? My nose is...” He stops mid-sentence, looking fearful. “Don’t move. They’re watching us.”

Persimmon, Scraps and Derpoke peer down at the creatures, some of whom are now staring back at them. The creatures are bigger than they had imagined—five times the size of raccoons—and they each have four long legs. Their tails are longer than raccoons’ tails and bushy only at the end. The trio is filled with a combination of excitement and anxiety. Their presence has been discovered. Now what?

Persimmon calls out with trepidation, “Hello?” Her voice gets lost among the moaning, though. She exclaims to her companions, “I’m going in closer.”

She crawls down a wooden pole toward a set of crates. There are around a hundred in all, each containing one creature. She notices that the stalls are so narrow that the creatures cannot turn around. In fact, they can barely lie down.

Persimmon talks calmly to the two creatures she is crawling toward. “I’m not going to hurt you, okay?”

The creatures step back in fear as Persimmon approaches, but there’s not much room for them to move. One of them slips on the messy wood slats and cries out as his back hits the wall.

“It’s okay. I’m a friend.” She sees that he has slipped on his own droppings. To her disgust, the wood below him is smeared with the foul sub-

stance, as is his black and white fur. “Goodness, sweet one, you need a dip in the stream.” She notices that the creature beside him is also covered in his own droppings.

Now that Persimmon is closer, she realizes how big and soulful the creatures’ eyes are. One of them whimpers in her direction, as if he’s trying to say something.

“I’m sorry,” Persimmon exclaims. “I don’t understand you.” She calls up to her friends. “I think he’s trying to speak to me but doesn’t know how.”

Derpoke calls down. “Do they seem dangerous at all?”

“No,” Persimmon remarks. “They seem scared. I... I think they’re babies.”

“Babies?!” Derpoke is stunned. “But they’re enormous.”

She gazes at the gentle giant. She half-whispers to herself, “There’s just something about them. They seem so innocent.”

The creature cries at her again.

“Are you hungry?” Persimmon asks, perplexed. “I’m sorry. I don’t have any food.”

Persimmon sees that he has a rope tied around his neck, connected to the wooden stall. “That’s odd. Why would you be tied up? It’s not like you can escape.”

The creature moves toward her, whimpering.

Derpoke screams. “Persimmon, he’s trying to eat you!”

“I’m fine.” Persimmon dismisses her frantic friend.

The creature keeps crying as he nears her. Persimmon is slightly intimidated but she doesn’t run away. Something in the creature’s eyes makes her trust him. He moves his head—which is about half the size of her entire body—toward her.

“I’m sorry, sweetness,” Persimmon apologizes. “I don’t have any food. I don’t even know what you eat.”

The sad creature moves his head closer and closer, and for one second she fears he might bite her, but instead he rests his head against her soft fur. By instinct, as if he were her own little pup, she caresses his head by his ear. He lets out a sigh, closes his melancholy eyes, and unbeknownst to her, for the first time in his miserable life, he is calm.

“You just wanted a hug.” Persimmon’s heart aches. She rests her head on top of his and begins to hum a lullaby that her mother used to sing to

her when she was a pup. And as she holds this sad creature close to her, she knows that she must help him. She doesn't know how yet, but she knows that somehow, some way, she must.

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