

"Celebrate the very
meaningful idea of friendship."
—Amy Poehler's *Smart Girls*

NTheCTURNALS

The Hidden Kingdom



Tracey Hecht and Sarah Fieber

Bonus
Animal Glossary
and more!

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Published by Fabled Films LLC, New York

ISBN: 978-1-944020-13-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017951811

First Edition: February 2019

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Cover Designed by Jaime Mendola-Hobbie
Interior Book Design by Notion Studio
Typeset in Stemple Garamond, Mrs. Ant and Pacific Northwest
Printed by Everbest in China

FABLED FILMS PRESS

NEW YORK CITY

www.fabledfilms.com

For information on bulk purchases for promotional use
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ingrampublishersvcs@ingramcontent.com or 1-866-400-5351



Book Four
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Fabled Films Press
New York

Chapter One

THE PARCHED PANGOLIN




“Oh goodness.” Tobin yawned and gazed up at the evening sky. The stars and moon were shining—it was time for his nightly adventure. But after a day of tossing and turning in the scratchy leaves of his burrow, the pangolin awoke tired, hungry, and thirsty. It was the valley’s dry season. There was little to eat or drink. And Tobin, known for eating a bit more food than most, was having an especially difficult time. Tonight, his throat was parched, his belly grumbled...and adventure was the furthest thing from his mind.

The pangolin stretched his anteater-like body. His eyes felt scratchy in the dry night air, and his leaf-like scales were cracked and creased, like the skin of a crocodile.

Tobin sighed then set off in search of even the tiniest snack or sip. He slowly trudged toward the bushes, sniffing the ground with his sensitive snout.





Usually, he could smell all kinds of things—the dew-covered petals of daffodils, the tangy rinds of oranges, the musky bark of big oaks. But recently, he could smell only dry earth and brown grass, scorched to death by the heat.

Except...wait a moment. Tobin's snout suddenly perked up. "Could it be?" Somehow, he had picked up a trace of moisture—the scent, he believed, of damp rock. Tobin's pace quickened into an eager trot. His mind danced with visions of flowing water, lush moss, and juicy termites.

He traveled just a short distance, but he was breathless when he reached his destination—a narrow opening in a wall of rock. The pangolin grinned—he had been right. There was water here. It wasn't exactly flowing from the crack. Actually, it was barely trickling. But it was water nonetheless.

Tobin closed his eyes and uncurled his long tongue—so long, in fact, that he kept it coiled inside his stomach when he wasn't using it. But now, he stretched it to its full, remarkable length, eager to catch the next drop.

"Hey! *Pangolino!*" Before even a single, cool drip could land on Tobin's parched tongue, he heard a loud, shrill voice calling to him from above.

Tobin gazed up. Perched high on a tree branch was his friend Bismark, a sugar glider—a tiny marsupial similar to a flying squirrel. Like Tobin, Bismark was nocturnal: awake by night, asleep by day. And, like Tobin, Bismark was hungry and thirsty.

The sugar glider spread his flaps—the stretchy skin that connected his arms and legs. Then, with a graceful leap, he glided down from his tree and joined his friend on the ground. "Have you seen what the drought has done to my poor pomelos?" he asked. Bismark opened his paws, revealing a lumpy fruit with a dark, shriveled rind.

Tobin shook his head. This was very upsetting. The grapefruit-like pomelos that grew on his friend's tree were usually plump and juicy.

"And it's not just my favorite fruit that has withered," moaned Bismark. "Look at me! Never has my soft, gray fur been so drab, so dreary, so dry." With an impatient shove, the sugar glider pushed Tobin aside. "Out of the way, *pangolino!*" he ordered, jumping in front of the crack in the rock. "I need water, too!" Then he closed his eyes, opened his mouth, and tilted back his head. As a droplet of water fell onto his tongue, Bismark shuddered in delight. He spread his legs wide and dug his tiny heels in the ground, positioning himself for the

next spurt of water. But alas—no more came. The trickle had come to an abrupt halt.

“What? *Qué? Quoi?*” The sugar glider pounded his fist on the stone, urging the water to flow. But all that seeped from the crack was a fine mist of dust that settled on his nose and prompted a sharp, high-pitched sneeze.

“This is unacceptable, unsatisfactable, un-stinking-fair!” Bismark sputtered, stomping his feet in outrage. He turned to Tobin. “You think that one little droplet is enough for this breathtaking body...this fabulous physique?” The sugar glider flexed his small muscles. Then, he spun on his toes in a circle, attempting to show himself off.

“Um...” Tobin’s voice trailed. There was no use in telling Bismark that, judging by size alone, he didn’t need that much water.

“Really, *compadre*, in the name of the night,” Bismark continued, “why did you steal all the water from your best and most brilliant *amigo*, hmm?”

“Oh goodness...I...I didn’t even have one—” Tobin stopped when he heard soft footsteps nearby. He knew the sound of those paws. The pangolin turned toward the brush. Sure enough, a fox emerged with a quiet rustle. It was his friend Dawn.

Immediately, Bismark scampered alongside the

fox. “My bella Dawn, my sweet, *mon amour*—you’ve awakened! And, behold: my thirst has been quenched after all. Your radiant, red fur can brighten even the driest and darkest of evenings!”

Tobin smiled. Dawn was the leader of the Nocturnal Brigade—the group the three friends had formed to rescue animals in need of their help. And Bismark was right—she could bring comfort and light, even in the most difficult times. But the sugar glider’s not-so-secret love for the fox was affecting his vision—though Dawn always looked poised and polished, her fur was more dull than radiant at the moment. Even the strongest animals of the valley, like the fox, were hurt by the drought. Especially droughts as severe as this one.

Dawn cleared her throat with a raspy cough.

“Oh, *mon amour!* You sound totally parched. You know...” Bismark mused, stroking the fur on his chin, “I managed to find a little sip of water just before you arrived. It’s gone now,” he continued, shooting Tobin a glare. “But I think there miiiiight still be a little moisture left on my lips....” The sugar glider gazed up at Dawn. He batted the lids over his dark, bulbous eyes. Then he stood as tall as he could on his tiptoes and pressed his lips into a pucker.

But the fox barely noticed her friend’s antics. Her

amber eyes were fixed on something in the distance. “Do you see that?” she asked. She pointed to some roundish objects.

Tobin squinted, trying to see what they were, but his eyesight was poor. “Oh goodness,” he said with a sigh. “I see something out there. But it all just looks fuzzy to me.”

“Exactly,” said Dawn. A gust of wind began to blow. As its speed picked up, the fuzzy spots Tobin had seen moved closer. At once, Dawn bolted toward them. “I’ll be right back,” she called over her shoulder.

“What is she doing?” asked Tobin. “What’s that she’s running to?”

“I hate to admit it, *amigo*,” said Bismark, “but I don’t know. It appears that this despicable dryness has taken its toll on the sheen of my coat *and* on my eyesight! It’s all a blur, I tell you. A fuzzy blur!” He craned his neck. “Though my lovely Dawn remains clear as ever.”

Starry-eyed, Bismark kept his gaze fixed on the fox until she returned with a tan, hay-like ball about the size of a large pumpkin. With her snout, the fox gently nudged it toward her two friends.

Tobin smiled. His eyes hadn’t failed him after all! It was fuzz—or a tumbleweed to be more precise. He should have known: tangles of it entered the valley each

dry season. He sniffed it just to be sure. “Tumbleweed,” he confirmed. “It looks strange, though.”



“Yes,” agreed Dawn. “I was thinking the same thing this evening when I first saw it. It’s unlike any tumbleweed we’ve seen before.” The fox circled the grassy ball. “Its seeds and sticks appear different.”

“*Blech!*” Bismark sputtered. “I detest tumbleweeds—the old kind and the new!” The sugar glider glowered at the odd, fuzzy ball. “Prepare to fight, you messy menace, you sticky stranger, you ugly orb!”

With that, Bismark reeled back his leg and punted the tumbleweed with a mighty kick, sending it bouncing into the clearing.



Eeeee!

Suddenly, a shrill shriek pierced the air. The trio looked at one another in alarm.

“Was that you, my parched *pangolino?*” asked Bismark. “You *have* been known to emit strange sounds...but I haven’t heard *that* one before.”

“Oh goodness, no,” replied Tobin. The pangolin blushed. He did have an active rear, tooting from time to time and letting out a potent, defensive odor when he got scared. But this time, Tobin had not done a thing. “It really wasn’t me,” he said.



“Then what was it?” asked Bismark.

The sugar glider and the pangolin turned to Dawn. She always seemed to know the answer to unusual questions like this. But even the fox looked confused. She took a step forward and studied the land. Then, with pricked ears and a craned neck, she listened more closely.

The scream-like sound came right from the clearing—not far from where they stood. But there was no trace of anyone there. So where, they all wondered, had it come from?

Chapter Two

HELP!



“Yoo-hoo!” called Bismark, cupping his hands to his mouth. “Who goes there?” The sugar glider wove through the thin line of trees that framed the clearing, seeking out the strange voice.

“*Hola? Bonne nuit? Saluto?*” Bismark called out yet again. “Show yourself, shrieky stranger. Do not be scared. Come to your Papa Bismark!”

The others, too, were searching. Dawn circled the clearing’s boundary and Tobin sniffed at dirt and roots, hoping to pick up a scent. When he failed to find anything, he lifted his head and called out into the dark.

“Hello?” The pangolin closed his eyes, listening closely for a reply. Normally, the valley was loud with the stirring of animals. But tonight, it was eerily quiet. Many creatures had left in search of food and water, and more were on their way out. Now, all Tobin could

hear were the sounds of the night—the low hum of the breeze, the crackling dry leaves, and the faint wisp of tumbleweeds sweeping over the grass.

“Any luck?” asked Dawn, joining Tobin near an old stump.

“Oh goodness,” he sighed. “I’m afraid not.”

“No luck here either,” said Bismark, gliding next to the fox. “But nothing to worry about, I’m sure. You know...” he mused, turning to Tobin, “that sound probably was you after all. All that water sloshing around your guts.” Bismark put his hands on his hips and shook his head from side to side. “Tsk-tsk, *pangolino*. I told you to save some for *moi!*”

“Really, it wasn’t me!” Tobin insisted. He blinked his eyes to clear his vision, which had suddenly grown blurry. “Maybe we’re just imagining things,” he said. “I do feel a bit faint from this heat.” The pangolin pressed his eyes shut again and swallowed hard.

“Tobin, are you okay?” asked Dawn.

“Oh...oh goodness, yes,” he replied. “I’m just a little...a little bit...*oof!*”

The woozy pangolin lost his balance, tipped backward and fell with a soft thud—onto a pile of dried grass and sticks.

Eeeeeee!

Right as Tobin’s rear hit the earth, a muffled shriek rang out again...and this time, it sounded like a cry of pain!

The pangolin quickly leaped to his feet and looked frantically every which way.

“Ah-ha! It *was* you!” Bismark shouted triumphantly, pointing at Tobin’s rear. “I knew it! This better not be a sign that your stinker’s about to blow!” The sugar glider plugged his tiny nose with one paw and fanned the air with the other.

“That wasn’t me—I promise!” said Tobin. “I think the noise came from the forest.”

Bismark scoffed, but the pangolin ignored his friend. He tilted his head toward the trees then gazed into their shadows. The forest was always dark, but tonight Tobin thought it felt even darker than usual. The pangolin gulped. Could some dangerous creature be lurking in the woods? Nervously, Tobin glanced back at his friends. “Something must be out there,” he whispered.

“Come on, *muchacho*. We all heard it,” said Bismark. “That noise came straight from



your rear. It was as clear as the full moon! Dawn, *mon amour*, am I right?”

“It wasn’t me,” insisted the pangolin. “Really.” But even the fox raised a questioning eyebrow. After all, she had heard the shriek come directly from Tobin’s behind, too.

“Maybe our hearing isn’t quite right. Maybe this dry weather is going to our heads,” she said, trying to make Tobin feel better.

“Or our butts,” Bismark muttered.

Tobin opened his mouth to protest. But before he could speak, a cry rang out.

“Help! Helllpppp!”

Dawn’s fur pricked on end. Bismark stood still as stone. And Tobin’s scales began to tremble. This scream was different from the ones they’d just heard. The words were clear—someone was in trouble, and the voice sounded familiar.

Without a word, the animals drew out their glittering, blue snakeskin capes—the cloaks they wore when they took on a mission to save someone in danger. Within a moment, the capes were fastened securely around their necks. The Brigade was ready.

“This way,” called Dawn. She was already on the



move, following the sound of the cry.

Tobin ran after her.

Bismark, however, scurried up the trunk of an elm tree then hopped out on a low-hanging branch. Proudly, he gazed down at his friends running into the forest. Then he puffed out his chest and called into the night, “We shall be bold in adventure! We shall be brave in challenge! The Nocturnal Brigade to the rescue!”

Chapter Three

TRAPPED



“Help! Help me!”

The voice cried out again—more urgent this time.

“It’s coming from that den up ahead!” shouted Dawn, calling back to her friends. Despite her tired limbs and dry throat, the fox continued to race through the trees. But the night’s heat was heavy, and her full speed was not nearly as fast as usual.

“Oh...goodness,” huffed Tobin, trying to keep up.

“Come on Señor Slow-Scales!” Bismark yelled down from the treetops. “Pick up the pace like your buddy Bismark—macho marsupial, glider *extraordinaire*, flying wonder!”

Despite his thirst and fatigue, Tobin forced his legs to move faster. He raced through the dried brush



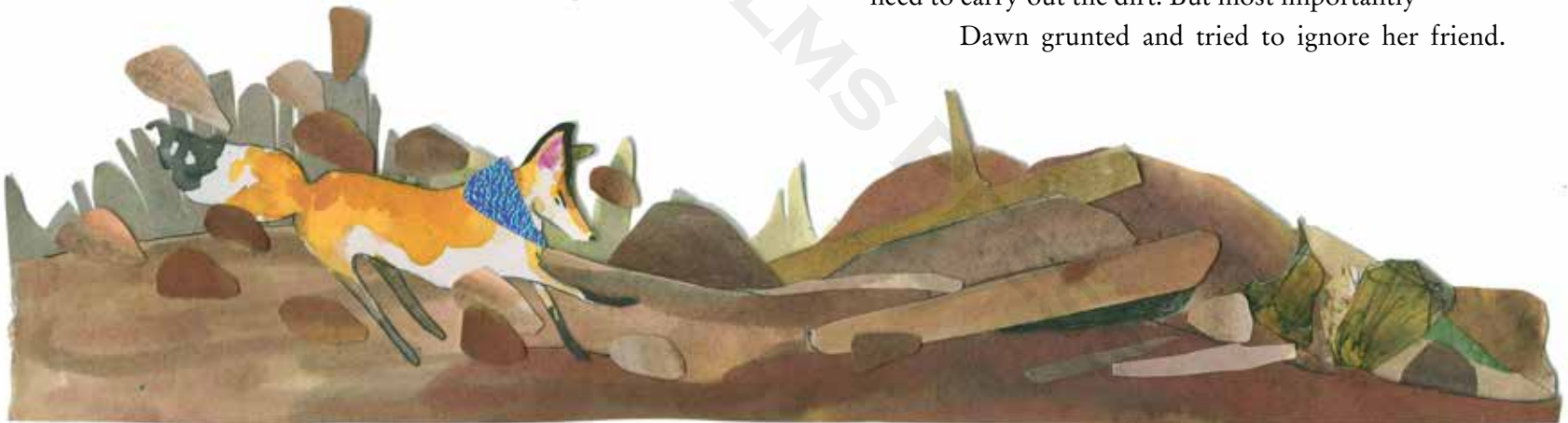
and wove through the leafless trees. Finally, exhausted and breathless, the Brigade reached the den Dawn had seen.

Though its main chamber lay underground, the entrance was visible under a ledge of rock. It was framed with dried mud and sticks, but it had caved in. Now, it was just a heap of dry earth. What caused this den to collapse? they wondered.

“Help! Hlllllp! Is somebody there?” the voice cried out again.

Tobin gasped. “Oh goodness! An animal is trapped inside!” He bent his snout toward the dirt. “We’re coming!” he called. “Hold on!”

Dawn circled the den, searching for a different



way in. There was none. “We have no choice,” she said. “We’ll have to dig.”

“Help!” the voice shrieked again. “Help me, please!”

Dawn and Tobin started to dig. Dawn loosened the dirt with her paws, and Tobin pierced and scooped it with his powerful claws.

Bismark, meanwhile, stood atop a small rock, a safe distance away from the dirty work. “Yes, *si*, good job, *amigos!*” he called, cupping his paws to his mouth. “Now just listen to me for some pointers. I will direct this rescue operation. My knowledge of engineering is unmatched, after all.” Bismark cleared his throat. “First, we must support the wall to avoid cave-ins. Then we need to carry out the dirt. But most importantly—”

Dawn grunted and tried to ignore her friend.

When it came to messy or hard work, Bismark preferred the role of maestro—“overseeing” the work rather than doing it. But it really didn’t matter. Since he was the size of a small chipmunk, he didn’t have the strength to be of much help anyway.

“Dig! Dig! Dig!” Tobin urged himself on as he tunneled into the den at full speed.

“*Pangolino!* Dawn, *mon amour!* Do you hear me?” Bismark shouted. “You should really consider the brilliant strategies I am laying out for you. Under my leadership, we can accomplish this task so much more—*blegh!*” A clump of flying dirt smacked Bismark in the face, landing right in his wide-open yapper. “*Thwip-thwap-thwap,*” he sputtered, spitting it out.

“Good work, Tobin,” said Dawn as the pangolin finished plowing through most of the soil. “We’re almost there!” the fox called into the den.

“Okay!” A faint call rose from the chamber beneath the ground. Tobin’s heart leaped in his chest. He knew that voice sounded familiar!

“It’s Cora!” he gasped. Tobin looked at Dawn in alarm. It was the Brigade’s beloved wombat friend. The pangolin’s pulse quickened. Dawn’s amber eyes widened. Then they started to dig again—harder and faster than ever.

“Don’t worry, Cora!” called Tobin, clawing the earth. “We’re coming!”

“*Oui*, we’re coming!” echoed Bismark, still perched on his rock. But even the sugar glider could not just stand there and watch, knowing that it was Cora in need. And so, with a wave of his flaps, Bismark finally made his way forward and landed next to his fellow Brigade-mates. “Mademoiselle Cora!” he said, yelling over his digging friends. “Have no fear! I, Bismark, savior of the night, rescuer of wombats, am here! I shall save you!” And then he joined his friends...flicking a tiny bit of dirt with a single toe.

“I can see her!” Tobin cried as he and Dawn broke through the last of the dirt. They jumped through the opening and descended into the den.

“Cora!” Tobin clawed through a scratchy patch of tumbleweed and, at last, reached the wombat. Breathless, the pangolin bent down beside her. “Are you okay?” he asked.

The wombat could only sputter in reply. But it took just one look at her to know the answer. Her body was trembling, and her ribcage showed through her skin. Tobin wondered when she last had food or a drink.

Gently, the pangolin held Cora’s face in his paws. Then he unfurled his long tongue and carefully

licked the grime from her cheeks. Tobin smiled. Cora's fur was dull and her nose was chapped, but her eyes still glimmered like always. "Thank goodness we found you," he whispered.

Immediately, Cora brightened. Then, slowly, she inched her front paw forward until it was nestled in Tobin's claw.

The pangolin felt his scales tingle, and a warm, fuzzy feeling—the one he always seemed to get around Cora—spread from the top of his scaly head all the way down to his claws.

Dawn bent toward the wombat. "How did this happen?" she asked, eager to gather some information.

Cora swallowed hard. "I don't know," she said at last. She took a shallow breath. "It seemed to collapse out of nowhere!"

"It was probably from the drought," Dawn reasoned. "Mud can dry into brittle dirt and crumble." The fox circled the chamber, studying the walls that remained. "Your den's walls must have caked up, flaked off in pieces, then collapsed."

"That's probably what happened," Cora agreed. "It's just impossible to know for sure." The wombat picked up a clump of tumbleweed then tossed it aside. "This tumbleweed blew into my den by the bundle last

night. I could barely even see through it!"

As Cora spoke, another piece of the odd tumbleweed rolled into the den.

"Goodness, it's everywhere," Tobin remarked.

Bismark scrunched his face in disgust. "I'll handle this one," he said. The sugar glider reeled back his puny leg. Then he kicked at the tuft of dried grass, plant stalks, and prickly fluff—but the ball clung to his foot. "*Blech!* Get it off me!" he shouted.

The sugar glider shook his foot in the air, flinging off most of the dry, grassy pieces. But one stick remained caught in his toes. "Oh no you don't!" he muttered. Bismark bent over and pawed at his foot. "Be gone!" he cried. "You nasty, icky, annoying, ugly.... Hmm." Suddenly, Bismark stopped his rant, tilted his head, and gazed down at the tumbleweed twig.

"This is actually a pretty fine stick," he said, plucking it from his toes. He swung the stick to and fro. "It's like a sword," he mused, "or a scepter!" Bismark thrust it into the air and proudly lifted his chin. "This stick really suits a royal creature like *moi*." Holding the stick high, the sugar glider marched a few paces, enjoying his regal act. Then, satisfied with his show, he tucked the stick in his flap for safekeeping. "Yes, a very fine stick indeed," he murmured.



Dawn hid a smile and turned her attention to Cora. “Is there anything else you can remember? Anything that might explain what happened to your den?”

Cora closed her eyes to concentrate. She sat silently for a few moments, thinking hard. “No,” she finally said, opening her eyes. “I can’t think of anything. Well...except for some strange noises.”

Dawn’s ears perked up. “What kind of strange noises?”

“I... I thought I heard cries,” she whispered. “Strange, tiny cries. But...” Cora looked down, embarrassed. “But I didn’t see anyone. No one was there.”

Dawn, Tobin, and Bismark exchanged startled glances. *Were Cora’s cries the same sounds they had heard earlier?*

“Were the cries high-pitched and squeaky?” Tobin asked.

“Um...I think so,” she said. “Oh, but don’t listen to me. I’m probably just hearing things. I’ve been so thirsty lately, I can’t even tell what is what!” Cora let out a cracked, dry cough. Then she coughed again—louder, this time, and raspier. Unable to stop, she clutched her ribs and curled up on the den floor.



“Cora needs water badly,” Tobin whispered. “We have to help her.”

“I know where there’s a watering hole,” Dawn began, “but it’s not nearby.” The fox eyed Cora nervously. The wombat was very weak and the journey would be hot and long.

“Oh, Tobin,” Cora whispered. “I...I don’t know if I can make it.”

“I do,” said the pangolin. With a swivel of his scales and a quick swipe of his claw, Tobin cut off a small piece of his cape. Then he gently tied the blue snakeskin around Cora’s thin wrist. “Now you can do anything!” he said, guiding the wombat out of the den.

“*Bueno*. Let’s go,” said the sugar glider. “Dawn said it’s thataway.” Bismark used his new stick to point east. “*Oui, mon amour?* Am I correct?”

“Yes.” The fox looked at her friends and sighed. It was clear that the race to Cora’s den, the hot, dry air, and the difficult digging had taken its toll. They all needed water badly. And Cora was so ill. Could they survive the journey?



THE NOCTURNALS

Bonus Content

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Character Animal Glossary

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Discussion Questions for Your Book Club

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Q&A with Authors Tracey Hecht
and Sarah Fieber

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Character Animal Glossary

Pangolin

Scientific Name: *Manis javanica*

Common Name: Malayan pangolin

Physical Characteristics: covered from just above nostrils to tips of tails by many rows of hard, overlapping, movable, sharp-tipped scales; 79–88 cm long, including the prehensile tail; scales on back and sides are olive-brown to yellow; underbelly and face are white; skin is bluish gray; small, conical head

Behavioral Characteristics: nocturnal; mainly solitary; timid; climbs trees; moves fast when threatened; strong digger

Diet: ants and termites

Map: species found in Southeast Asia within the Indomalayan regions

Habitat: primary and secondary forests; open savannahs; areas vegetated with thick bush; gardens; plantations

Major Threats: hunting; poaching

Status: Critically Endangered

Red Fox

Scientific Name: *Vulpes vulpes*

Common Name: red fox

Physical Characteristics: pale yellowish-red to deep reddish-brown coat on top with white or ashy underside; lower parts of legs usually black; tail has white or black tip; dark brown or black nose; 45.5–90 cm body length; 30–55 cm tail length

Behavioral Characteristics: nocturnal; solitary; often lives in dens abandoned by other animals; can run up to 48 km/h and jump 2 m high; stays in same home range entire life

Diet: rodents; rabbits; insects; fruit; carrion

Map: species found in much of the northern hemisphere from the Arctic Circle to Central America, the steppes of central Asia, and northern Africa

Habitat: forest; tundra; prairie; desert; mountains; farmlands; urban areas

Major Threats: loss of habitat

Status: Least Concern

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Sugar Glider

Scientific Name: *Petaurus breviceps*

Common Name: sugar glider

Physical Characteristics: head and body 12–13 cm; tail 15–48 cm; bluish-gray back with pale front; dark stripe down back to end of nose; stripes on sides of face; gliding membrane from outer side of fore foot to ankle of rear foot; scent glands on forehead and chest

Behavioral Characteristics: nocturnal; spreads limbs to open gliding membrane to glide up to 45 m; nests in groups; territorial; males mark members of group with scent glands; uses sounds to communicate

Diet: pollen; nectar; insects and larvae; arachnids; small vertebrates

Map: species found in New Guinea and certain nearby islands, Bismark Archipelago, and Northern and Eastern Australia

Habitat: forests

Major Threats: none

Status: Least Concern

Wombat

Scientific Name: *Vombatus ursinus*

Common Name: coarse-haired wombat

Physical Characteristics: 68–109 cm in length; large and squat with short limbs and thick claws; broad, rounded head; stubby tail; small dark eyes; small round ears; thick, coarse brown or blackish fur; square muzzle

Behavioral Characteristics: nocturnal and crepuscular (active at twilight); solitary; lives in burrows made by scooping dirt with claws and filling with nests of grass, leaves, and sticks; sunbathes during the day; territorial and will use strong back legs to slam predators with backside when threatened

Diet: leaves; roots and tubers; wood, bark, or stems

Map: species native to the Australian biogeographical region of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Flinder's Island, Tasmania, and parts of South Australia

Habitat: forest; scrub forest; savannah or grassland

Major Threats: none

Status: Least Concern

Character Animal Glossary

Lyrebird

Scientific Name: *Menura novaehollandiae*

Common Name: superb lyrebird

Physical Characteristics: 76–99 cm long; short, round, weakly muscled wings; long spindly legs; brown, grey, and reddish plumage with an ornate tail with sixteen feathers, with the two outermost together forming the shape of a lyre instrument

Behavioral Characteristics: nocturnal; timid; lives in nests close to the ground lined with ferns, feathers, moss, and rootlets; capable of imitating almost any sound; rarely flies but instead runs and jumps to higher ground when threatened; dances to attract mates

Diet: ground-dwelling insects; spiders; frogs

Map: species native to Australia

Habitat: forest

Major Threats: habitat loss

Status: Least Concern

Stick Bug

Scientific Name: *Diapheromera femorata*

Common Name: stick bug

Physical Characteristics: length can range from 75 to 95 mm; green or brownish body; long torso with thin legs; generally wingless; may have ridges or bark-like tubercles; sticky toe and heel pads allow for grip while climbing

Behavioral Characteristics: diurnal at birth and nocturnal once fully grown; may pair with other stick bugs for long periods of time; uses camouflage and rocks to hide from predators; can be aggressive and territorial and will commonly strike out at other insects with forelegs in a manner similar to boxing; able to amputate and regrow limbs; commonly lives in the trees from which it draws its food

Diet: leaves, especially from oak and hazelnut trees; stems; flowers

Map: species mainly found in North America

Habitat: forest; mountains

Major Threats: none

Status: Not Endangered

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Leaf Bug

Scientific Name: *Phylliidae*

Common Name: leaf bug

Physical Characteristics: 28–100 mm in body length; green or brownish body; large forewings that spring from the abdomen and may have spots, veins, holes, or other markings to imitate leaves; long limbs that typically have ridges to further resemble foliage; males may have antennae

Behavioral Characteristics: nocturnal; sways when walking to imitate a leaf blowing in the wind; males can fly; hides on forest floor and seeks out plants to eat; molts until reaching maturity

Diet: leaves, especially from oak trees or berry sprigs; eucalyptus; rose

Map: species found in Australia and South Asia

Habitat: forest

Major Threats: none

Status: Not Endangered

The information in the glossary was created through research on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (<http://www.iucnredlist.org/>) and the University of Michigan's Museum of Zoology Animal Diversity Web (<http://animaldiversity.org/>).

Discussion Questions for Your Book Club

1. The first chapter in *The Hidden Kingdom* indicates that the conflict is person against nature. At what point is it obvious that another animal is the real conflict?
2. At the beginning of the book, the Nocturnal Brigade hears a familiar sound, but they aren't sure what it is. Explain why they accuse Tobin of making the sound. How do they determine the source of the sound?
3. Dawn is the clear leader of the Nocturnal Brigade. Discuss the animals' loyalty to Dawn. What does such loyalty say about her leadership skills? Cite specific passages that reveal that even Dawn has doubts about finding water.
4. Strength may refer to one's physical abilities, but it may also be a character trait. How does the drought affect the physical strength of the animals? Discuss how they call upon strength of character to solve the mystery of the drought. Identify individual strengths of Dawn, Tobin, and Bismark.
5. Which character from *The Hidden Kingdom* is the most like you and why? Which character is most unlike you and why? Which character would you most want as your friend and why?
6. Describe the tumbleweed that Dawn finds. What is the purpose of the tumbleweed as the story advances? What about the mysterious voices, churning ground, vanishing chute, swirling tree bark, and disappearing water? How are these clues that something evil is the cause of the drought?
7. Discuss the false hope that the animals experience on their quest to solve the mystery. Even Dawn is confused by the strange events. How do the flowers give them hope again?

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8. How is Bismark his own worst enemy when the Brigade comes face to face with King Kami, a chameleon? What is Tobin's role in saving Bismark?
9. Bismark says the fight between Tobin and King Kami is a "tongue-of-war." How does such wordplay make the plight of the Brigade humorous? In what other ways do the authors create humor?
10. Discuss King Kami's explanation for causing the drought. What prompts the chameleon to reveal that his real name is Carl? How does Carl help the Brigade save the animals in the forest? What is the moral of the story?
11. Think about what the Nocturnal Brigade did throughout *The Hidden Kingdom*. What would you have done similarly and differently?
12. Fear is an underlying theme in the entire *Nocturnals* series. Compare and contrast the way the animals deal with fear in *The Hidden Kingdom* with how they deal with it in the previous three novels. How does the personality of each animal explain the way each animal confronts fear?

Q&A with Tracey Hecht and Sarah Fieber

What sparked your imagination for *The Hidden Kingdom*? Or did you and Sarah come up with this together?

Tracey: We come up with all of our outlines together; they are very collaborative and much more fun to create together. We usually start with an environment, a villain, and a motivation for the villain, and then we research animals, flora, and fauna to give us ideas for plot.

What challenges do you face in the writing process as a team, and how do you overcome them?

Sarah: There are challenges every step of the way—during the brainstorming, writing, and editing processes. Sometimes, during brainstorming, we have different ideas of where the book should go. You just have to keep bouncing ideas around and talk it out until there's an agreement. As I write, I'll occasionally hit speed bumps where I just feel stuck. Occasionally, I plow through them—other times I just need a break. And the editing can be really tedious. It's a verrrry long process—longer than most would expect. But we're a team and we're perfectionists—listening to each other and putting in the extra time is ultimately what makes our work so satisfying.

Which of the Nocturnal Brigade is most like you? And does each of you write the character you most relate to?

Sarah: We all contribute to every character—we don't split up the writing like that. I think I have some of Dawn, Tobin, and Bismark in me. I can be pensive, sensitive, and goofy. I tend to like writing Bismark the most, though. He brings out my silly side.

Tracey: That is really true; we connect with all our characters—even the new characters we introduce in each book. My favorite non-Nocturnal Brigade character is of course Cora (first and fourth book), and I think I like writing Tobin the most because he's just so darn sweet and adorable!

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What is your favorite scene from *The Hidden Kingdom*?

Sarah: That's a tough one! I don't want to give anything away . . . but (spoiler alert) I love when the villain dangles Bismark over the pool near the end of the book. I always get a kick out of Bismark's melodramatic near-death speeches.

Tracey: I love whenever Tobin's tongue plays into the action! Sarah is a master of Tobin's tongue-tied dialect—lots of thwppt, pwethase, oh gooothdnesses. It just cracks me up every time it happens, and the battle with the villain in *The Hidden Kingdom* is so good!

What scene in *The Hidden Kingdom* was the most difficult to write?

Sarah: I think the quicksand scene was the most difficult. It was important to depict it realistically but also magically. That's tough to do (especially when you've never been in quicksand yourself)!

Tracey: I think the hardest part of *The Hidden Kingdom* was giving away meaningful clues of the “hidden army” without exposing the actual characters or plot. It played into the illustrations as well. We wanted to be engaging and progressive but not reveal anything too early.

Acknowledgments

A special thanks to Kate Liebman for all her work on *The Nocturnals* series. We love your illustrations. We would like to thank our team, which grows tighter and better with every book: Susan, Debra, Ellen, Liz, Jaime, Jacques, Will. Not to mention the friends and family who participate in all that we do. Thank you.

We'd also like to thank the schools, teachers, librarians, and booksellers who have grown with us during the publication of the four *Nocturnals* books. We love writing *The Nocturnals*, but even more, we love enjoying the stories with you, your students, and your readers. Sharing these books with you all is the most rewarding (and fun!) part of what we do.

We also want to thank Rumur for all his creativity, humor, and hard work. We will miss you!

Tracey & Sarah

About the Authors

Tracey Hecht is a writer and entrepreneur who has written, directed and produced for film. She has created a Nocturnals Read Aloud Writing program for middle graders in partnership with the New York Public Library that has expanded nationwide. She splits her time between Oquossoc, Maine and New York City.

Sarah Fieber pursued her lifelong passion for writing at Yale, and has her Masters of Professional Writing from USC, and an MFA from NYU. She has published several short stories and is currently working on a new middle grade series. She lives in New York City with her dog Beau. This is her first children's book.

About the Illustrator

Kate Liebman is an artist who lives and works in New York City. She graduated from Yale University, has contributed to the Brooklyn Rail, and has shown her work at various galleries.

About Fabled Films

Fabled Films is a publishing and entertainment company creating original content for young readers and middle grade audiences. Fabled Films Press combines strong literary properties with high quality production values to connect books with generations of parents and their children. Each property is supported with additional content in the form of animated web series and social media as well as websites featuring activities for children, parents, bookstores, educators and librarians.

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