

THE NOCTURNALS

Book One
The Mysterious Abductions

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PROLOGUE



As the first light of day surged above the horizon, Tobin crept toward home. It had been a long night of foraging for food, and the pangolin was feeling tired. “Mmm.” The anteater-like creature yawned and slumped at the base of a tree. “Perhaps I’ll just take a quick rest....” Tobin’s sleepy eyes drooped shut.

Suddenly, something heavy dropped right on his scaly head.

“Ouch!”

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The confused pangolin reached for the greenish-yellow object and examined it with his taloned paws. "A pomelo!" he exclaimed. Eagerly, Tobin peeled back the fruit's thick, spongy rind and took a whiff with his keen, elongated snout. "Heavenly!" He sighed. "Absolutely heavenly!"

But before he could taste the fruit's citrusy flesh, a voice screeched down from above. "Thief!" it cried. "Strange creature with back of blades! How dare you steal the bounty of my tree?"

Tobin dropped the pomelo at once. He was so startled that a small, smelly poof escaped from his rear. "Oh dear," he mumbled.

"Pee-yew!" yelled the high-pitched voice.

Tobin looked up. A small, furry animal was perched in the branches, pinching his nose with one paw. He looked somewhat like a squirrel, with dark round eyes and a long furry tail.

"That stench! That odor! That tang!" The creature scrunched its face in disgust. "This calls for the flaps." With that, he extended his arms and legs, revealing the winglike skin that connected his limbs. Frantically, he fanned the still-stinky air.

"Oh my," remarked Tobin, staring at the unique appendages. "How elegant."

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“Ah yes.” The animal sighed. “We sugar gliders are impressive indeed.” He puffed out his chest with pride. “Fine physique...fabulous facial features...phenomenal fitness!” Fueled by his own self-esteem, the sugar glider launched from his perch, allowing the wind to gather gracefully under his wings and carry him to the ground.

Tobin smiled and stepped toward his new acquaintance. He was just about to introduce himself properly when he heard another strange voice from the brush.

“Is there a problem?” it said.

The pangolin turned toward the sound. But this time he did not jump. In contrast to the sugar glider’s shrill pitch, the voice he’d just heard was gentle and soft. Tobin stared into the foliage. “Who’s there?” he asked.

Out of the green leaves emerged a slender red fox.

“Oh *mon dieu!*” The sugar glider swooned, clasping his hands to his heart. “Never have my big brown eyes beheld such beauty outside of my own reflection!” He approached the fox and dropped to one knee. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Bismark: macho marsupial, sweetest of sugar gliders, and your one true love.” Quickly, he snatched the pomelo from

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under the pangolin's nose and presented it to the fox.
"For you, my lady."

The newcomer raised an eyebrow. This bold creature, despite standing on tiptoe, barely reached her knee. She turned to Tobin. "Is everyone all right here?" she asked, twitching her nose. "I thought I smelled trouble."

"Si, the stinky one woke me up just as I was about to fall asleep."

"Oh, um...excuse me," responded the pangolin, bashfully shrugging his scales. "I spray my defensive odor when I get scared." He blushed. "I'm sorry...I can't help it."

The fox looked down at Tobin with her almond-shaped eyes and gave a reassuring nod of her head.

The pangolin smiled. "I'm Tobin," he said, extending a paw.

"I am Dawn," said the fox.

The sugar glider wedged himself between his two new acquaintances. "But of course you are!" he exclaimed. "Dawn—the magnificent moment each day when I settle in for my daily renewal, my dream-filled slumbers, my sunlit sleep." Bismark bowed deeply. "Your glow rivals that of the full moon, my lady."

"You mean, you also sleep during the day?"

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asked Tobin, turning to the sugar glider.

Bismark stood tall. “*Mais oui!*” he confirmed. “I am a night prowler. I find my beetles and bananas when the moon is bright and the mood is right.” The sugar glider spun close to the fox. “And you, *mon amour?*”

“I maintain evening hours, as well,” replied Dawn.

Tobin’s eyes brightened. “We’re all nocturnals! Awake at night, asleep by day.”

Bismark beamed. “By the stars!” he declared, thrusting his fist toward the glimmering sky above. “We are animals *de la noche*, keepers of the night, a Nocturnal Brigade! We can be bold in adventure...we can be brave in challenge...we can be—”

“You can be dinner.”

A sharp hiss pierced the quiet air. Quickly, the pangolin, sugar glider, and fox spun around. Behind them was a menacing black snake with a bright blue belly. Its dark tongue flicked in and out.

“Hate to break up this beautiful moment, but I’m getting hungry over here.” It hissed, and without another word of warning, it sprang toward them, fangs bared.

At once, Tobin, Bismark, and Dawn cleared the hungry snake’s path. With his flaps spread out wide, the

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sugar glider leapt back up into the tree. Tobin curled into a ball, shielding himself with his scales. And Dawn jumped to the side just in the nick of time; the serpent's breath was hot on her tail.

Fuming and famished, the snake reared its head, its yellow eyes blazing like flames. Then, something happened. As the snake sprang forth again, time seemed to slow. Bismark looked at Dawn. The fox drew toward Tobin. The pangolin curled even tighter. Somehow, they knew what to do.

As Tobin held his breath, Dawn cocked her leg and punted the pangolin. Whoosh! He flew through the air—a spinning ball of armor—forcing the snake to jump back. As the serpent reeled in shock, Bismark flew from his branch, his tiny fist clenched and ready.

“Hiiiiya!” With a high-pitched yelp, he knocked the snake square in the jaw.

The serpent hissed with rage and opened its mouth. But the fox had charged from behind, and before the snake could clamp down its jaws, Dawn clamped down hers...right on the snake's narrow tail. Round and round went the snake as the fox rotated her neck. And then, with a flick of her head, Dawn whipped the serpent back and flung it into the bushes.

Breathless and stunned, the fox, the pangolin,

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and the sugar glider stared into the brush, ensuring the snake was scared off. Then, they turned to each other.

“Is everyone all right?” asked Dawn.

“Oh goodness!” gasped Tobin. “That all happened so fast. I didn’t even have time to think.”

Bismark’s chest swelled with pride. “Who needs to think when we have instinct? We are the Nocturnal Brigade—we fit together like the moon and the stars, like the wind and the wing, like—”

“Like a team!” suggested Tobin.

“Like friends,” said Dawn.

For a moment, the animals stood in meaningful silence: Bismark, tiny in height, but grand in gesture; Tobin, armored with scales, yet tender at heart; and Dawn, delicate in manner, but strong in wisdom.

Tobin grabbed the pomelo and broke it into three equal sections. Together, the threesome savored the sweet, fragrant fruit and watched the moon fade away. The night was drawing to a close, but their friendship—and their adventures—were just about to begin.

Chapter One

A SHRIEK IN THE NIGHT



“They’re late!” exclaimed Bismark. The sugar glider paced the dark land, searching for his absent friends. “We agreed to meet promptly at dusk,” he muttered to himself.

At last, a voice emerged from the brush. “Oh goodness!” it panted. Rubbing his eyes, the pangolin hurried into the clearing. “I’m so sorry. I overslept.”

Bismark gave a slight roll of his oversized eyes. “I shall let it slide this time, though tardiness is quite

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unacceptable. The marsupial family is always prompt, always ready, always...*bonjour!*" His voice dropped in pitch as he caught sight of Dawn's red muzzle poking through the brush. "How are you, my tardy but captivating canine?"

The fox furrowed her brow. "Bismark," she said, "what are you wearing?"

The sugar glider spun, showcasing a shimmering blue snakeskin he wore on his back like a cape.

Tobin's eyes widened in admiration. "So shiny!" he said.

"Let's focus on my cape," replied Bismark. "But yes, my fur glimmers like polished amber!" Shooting a wink at the fox, the sugar glider licked his palms and smoothed his silver-gray coat.

"Bismark," said Dawn, "the costume. Why are you wearing that thing?"

The sugar glider gasped. "Retract that remark at once! This is no mere costume, no ordinary 'thing'." He shook his head in distaste. "What you see before you," he declared, "is the majestic uniform of our brilliant Brigade. Together we will confront the dangers that lurk in the shadows. With these around our shoulders, sparkling like the starry sky, we will bring hope and protection to all the animals of the night. And see?"

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Bismark reached into the folds of his wingflap. “*Voila!* Two more for my favorite *amigos*.”

Dawn and Tobin accepted the skins of deep blue and draped them around their necks.

“Stunning. Absolutely stunning!” crooned Bismark, circling the fox in her new garb. “Only the best of the best for my canine princess.” Standing on tiptoe, the sugar glider placed his face just inches from Dawn’s. “You know,” he said, twirling his whiskers, “that blue-bellied black snake needed a little persuading to part with his precious skin.” Bismark flexed his muscles and winked.

Dawn raised an eyebrow, unamused by the sugar glider’s tall tale. Tobin, however, took the bait. “You went back and wrestled the blue-bellied black snake by yourself?” he asked, his mouth falling open.

Bismark puffed out his chest. “*Absolument!*” he confirmed, raising his chin toward the stars.

Dawn sighed knowingly.

“Well,” stammered the sugar glider, pawing his fur, “what I meant to say is...wrestling is a strong word, of course...”

“But it was so big!” said Tobin, his eyes widening.

“Yes!” cried Bismark. “Humongous! Gigantic! Gargantuan! Unfathomably—” Catching sight of Dawn’s

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frown, the sugar glider's words caught in his throat.

But the pangolin pressed on. "Were you injured?" he asked.

"Oh yes," replied Bismark. "You should've seen all the—"

Dawn cleared her throat.

"I mean...n-not quite," the sugar glider stammered, remembering the already-shed skin he'd encountered on his peaceful, moonlit stroll. "There was no...but yes! No! I mean...of course, yes! No! Collywobbles...polyglot...nincompoop...onomatopoeia!" Bismark's eyes rolled back in his head, as if searching the surface of his brain for more words.

"Eeeeeeee!" A bloodcurdling shriek interrupted Bismark's rant. It pierced the air and echoed, haunting and faint, through the trees.

"What was that?" cried Tobin, jumping behind the fox's raised tail.

Bismark crouched under his cape.

Even the fox seemed alarmed. Though her stance remained tall and brave, the hair on her back stood on end, like a long row of blades.

With vigilant eyes, she scanned the trees above. A curtain of drifting clouds obscured the moon, and

A Shriek in the Night

the night's light shifted from a clear, deep blue to an ominous gray. She drew in her breath. "It appears the Brigade might be needed sooner than we had thought."

About the Author

Tracey Hecht is a writer and entrepreneur who has written, directed and produced several films and founded multiple businesses. Her company Fabled Films is releasing *The Nocturnals*. This is Tracey Hecht's first middle grade book.

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About Fabled Films

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