

Book Three
The Fallen Star

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Chapter One

SHOOTING STARS



“Oh goodness, there goes another one! And another and another!” Tobin cried. The pangolin’s eyes grew wide as he pointed up into the night sky. His scales covered his body like the leaves of an artichoke, and now they quivered with excitement.

“I’ve never seen so many shooting stars!” He eagerly pointed them out to his friends, Bismark, a sugar glider, and Dawn, a red fox, who sat on either side of him. Perched on a low, sturdy branch of Bismark’s

THE NOCTURNALS

pomelo tree, they had a perfect view of the streaks of light darting across the sky.

“Ah, yes, the heavens are ablaze!” Bismark leaned in toward the fox. “Though nothing rivals the flame of our true love—isn’t that right, *mon amour*?” The sugar glider, who resembled a squirrel with his dark round eyes, long furry tail, and small limbs, gave the fox a quick wink.

“The sky does appear quite curious this evening,” Dawn replied, ignoring her small friend.

Following the fox’s gaze, Bismark and Tobin watched three more stars zip through the sky, tails of fire trailing in their wake. Each star briefly cast the shadowy treetops throughout the forest in a soft, blue, glittering light.

“Oh my,” Tobin said, clasping his claws together. “They just keep coming! Have you ever seen so many shooting stars at once?”

Dawn watched another set of stars flash through the night like a school of silver minnows swimming in a dark pond. Her eyes flared with their reflection. The sky was indeed fascinating tonight.

“It’s the most beautiful, brilliant sky I’ve ever seen!” Tobin added.

“Beautiful, yes, but brilliant? Not quite.”

Shooting Stars

Bismark stood up on his short, scrawny legs. “For true brilliance, *mi amigo*, look no further than the star of the stars, the flame of the fire, the—”

“Bismark—” Dawn interrupted.

“—spectacle of the spectacular!” Bismark finished proudly, and flung out his arms so that his flaps, the stretchy skin connecting his four limbs, billowed in the breeze. Then, with a loud whoop, the glider launched from his perch, letting the warm nighttime air lift him. With the air ballooning beneath his flaps, he sailed to another branch of his pomelo tree with ease.

“And that, *mes amis*, is the true shooting star of the valley!” Bismark lowered his head with a bow.

Tobin clapped his long, taloned claws together and giggled with delight.

Dawn raised an eyebrow, but her lips curved into a small smile. Then she returned her gaze to the sky, just in time to watch another smattering of shooting stars crisscross above.

“Well then,” continued Bismark, lowering his arms and surveying the branches overhead. “If my flaps don’t catch your fancy, *mon amour*, perhaps my fruit will. What’s a star show without a little snack, anyway? Who’s up for a pomelo?”

“Oh goodness,” said Tobin. The bulky belly

THE NOCTURNALS

of his anteater-like body rumbled at the thought. “A pomelo would be lovely.”

“Yes, yes, scaly one. We know you’re always hungry!” Bismark reached for one of the glistening, golden-green citrus fruits hanging heavily from the branch above his head and plucked it with a snap. “And for you, *mi bella*? A little bit of sugar for my sweet?”

Dawn nodded, but her amber eyes remained fixed on the stars above.

The glider scurried across the branch and around the tree trunk to his friends, a plump grapefruit-like pomelo in hand. “Your wish is my command!”

With a slick swish of his claws, Bismark split the pomelo open and sliced it into thirds. Its skin—coral, emerald, and gold—unfurled to reveal a treasure of ruby-red wedges within. “*Voilà!*” he exclaimed. “Here it is!”

“Oh goodness, this one looks delicious,” said Tobin. The pangolin uncurled his long, pink tongue. It was so long, in fact, that he coiled it inside his stomach when he wasn’t using it. But now that it was exposed and outstretched, he eagerly used it to lap at his share of the fruit.

“Would you expect anything less, *muchacho*?” said Bismark. His face shone with the sticky pulp of his own piece, which he eagerly devoured. “Everyone

Shooting Stars

knows my tree grows the sweetest, tastiest pomelos in the valley.”

As the three friends chewed contentedly, they watched the streaks of light from the shooting stars gradually dim. The moon began to fade with the approach of sunrise. After a lone shooting star vanished across the horizon, Dawn rose to her feet.

“That seems to have been the last of them,” she said. The fox swallowed her final piece of pomelo and stretched her willowy limbs. “Perhaps it’s time for bed.”

Bismark leaped to his feet. “My thoughts exactly, *chérie!*” he said, scrambling to her side. “A glider this *grandissimo* needs his beauty rest, after all. Allow me to walk with you to your lovely home.”

Tobin yawned, his eyelids drooping. Like his two friends, the pangolin was nocturnal: asleep by day, awake by night. But as he started to rise, something twinkling in the distance caught his attention.

“Oh goodness, wait! There’s one more,” he cried, pointing to the horizon. Indeed, another shooting star had appeared. Only this one seemed different. It was brighter—much, much brighter—than the others. As it streaked across the sky, it seemed as if the entire valley was suddenly illuminated by a second, more dazzling moon.

THE NOCTURNALS

“Ooh! Let’s all make a wish on this one—the brightest of them all,” said the pangolin. “I wish...” His scaly brow furrowed. “I wish that we could have as many pomelos as we could ever eat!”

“*Amigo!* Has all that sugar gone to your skull?” Bismark scrambled higher into his tree to watch the star’s fiery flight. “Everyone knows that if you say your wish aloud, it won’t come true. Of course, it goes without saying what *I* wish for—isn’t that right, *mi bella?*” Bismark said, returning to Dawn with his small hand on his heart.

But the fox said nothing in response. Instead, her amber eyes narrowed as she tracked this final star shooting across the southern sky. This one wasn’t fading away like the others. No—this one looked like it was growing brighter. And brighter. And brighter still.

“Bismark, Tobin...” Dawn’s voice carried an air of alarm.

“Yes, what is it my sweet? Has the moment arrived for us finally to declare our true feelings? Has this brilliant blaze in the sky sparked the flame of love in your heart?” Bismark’s voice trailed off. “Hmm, this star sure is taking its sweet time falling...and falling...and falling...”

The sugar glider blinked and rubbed his eyes.

Shooting Stars

The star's flame was now so bright, he could hardly focus on it.

Increasing in speed, the shooting star dipped lower and lower.

Tobin's mouth dropped open. "D-Dawn? What's going on?" The frightened pangolin's voice came out in a whisper.

The fox stared in disbelief. The star was traveling closer and closer. It was heading right toward them!

"Great Scott! It's coming for me!" Bismark cried.

"Everyone, hold on!" commanded the fox.

The three friends dug their claws into the tree bark and ducked as a blinding ball of light shot overhead. It sizzled and buzzed and hissed as it traveled through the sky in a low arc. Its fiery blaze stunned their eyes and forced them to crouch for cover.

And then, just as fast, all went silent, and the sky darkened.

After a tense moment, the trio slowly gazed up.

Bismark rubbed his big brown eyes. "Phew! That was a close one. But nothing *I* was scared of, of course. Just a—"

BAM!

Without warning, a massive explosion rippled through the valley with a deafening roar. The tops of

THE NOCTURNALS

the trees waved violently in a huge blast of wind. Entire branches of pomelos splintered off and tumbled to the ground, their leaves twisting and turning in the whirling, swirling air.

“*Mon dieu!*” Bismark clung to Dawn’s leg in terror.

The earth shook, boulders rattled and jumped, and Bismark’s tree lurched, hurling the three from their perches. Tobin and Dawn dropped straight to the forest floor with heavy, headfirst thuds. Bismark tried to hold fast to his branch, but it snapped off in his claws. With a crack, he was sent hurtling high into the air, like a stone flung from a slingshot.

“This calls for the flaps!” the glider cried, desperately stretching his limbs to catch a gust of wind. But the wild, whistling air blew his flaps inside out, and the next thing he knew, he was spiraling down, down, down to the earth in a rain of falling pomelos and leaves.

Chapter Two

ALL ALONE



“Oomph!”

Tobin groaned. Then he peeled his sensitive eyes open and cringed. The pangolin had taken quite a nasty tumble. His skull was throbbing, and his limbs felt stiff and sore as he gingerly uncurled his body. He had rolled into a tight ball before hitting the ground—this was the position he took whenever he felt frightened or threatened. But now he sat upright, taking a deep breath and scanning his surroundings nervously.

THE NOCTURNALS

“Dawn? Bismark?” he called into the darkness.

Tobin looked in every direction but saw only piles of fallen branches and brush. Three nearby trees had been uprooted whole, and several large boulders had tumbled forward, careening into each other. *What happened?* the pangolin wondered, rubbing his head, his thoughts cloudy. Then he remembered: the falling star! He frantically looked to the sky.

But now, all seemed calm. The full moon was hanging serenely above the forest. The stars that circled it were twinkling, not falling. Tobin exhaled.

“Oh goodness,” he murmured with relief. But then he realized that the moon was hanging high in the sky, even though it had been nearly sunup before the fallen star had crashed to earth. That meant the whole day had passed! Had he really been unconscious that long? The pangolin’s heart started to race.

“Dawn? Bismark?” he called out again, this time with more urgency. There was no sign of his friends. He dug at the piles of debris, searching for them. Rocks, clods of dirt, and grass shot out behind him. “Oh goodness! Where is everyone?” he whimpered as he moved among the rubble.

“Tobin?” a voice called out.

The pangolin froze. Someone was burrowing

All Alone

out of a pile of leaves and branches near one of the fallen trees. Someone with tawny fur and a familiar, white-tipped tail.

“Dawn!” he cried. The pangolin raced over to help free his friend. Then he brushed the leaves off her coat.

Dawn shook the remaining leaves from her limbs. She took note of the moonlight and narrowed her eyes. “An entire day has passed, but we are lucky to be unharmed.” Then, noticing the sugar glider’s absence, her voice tightened. “Tobin, where is Bismark?”

Dawn and Tobin gazed up to search the heights of Bismark’s pomelo tree. Its branches, normally covered with thick leaves and heavy fruit, were almost entirely bare. There was no sign of the glider anywhere.

“Oh goodness!” cried Tobin.

Dawn quickly began to clear the earth, flinging aside the branches and pomelos that littered the forest floor. Tobin, meanwhile, lowered his keen snout to the ground, nostrils flaring. He could track almost anything with his superior sense of smell.

“Bismark! Where are you?” he called as he sniffed. The pangolin gulped. Why wasn’t Bismark answering? Where was the glider’s boisterous voice? His familiar musk? Tobin furiously inhaled the scents along

THE NOCTURNALS

the earth, searching for a sign of his friend.

The pangolin poked his snout into a pile of broken, spear-like sticks. Their jagged ends scratched his nose. “Oh!” he muttered, but then he paused. A whiff of damp fur played over his nostrils. His eyes widened.

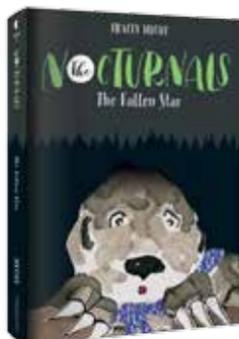
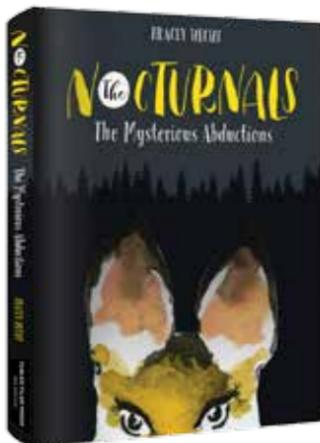
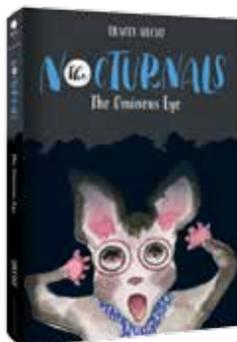
“Dawn!” he cried.

The fox sprinted over at once. She grasped the sharp branches in her jaws and cracked them in half while Tobin shoveled branches and dirt behind them. Then, together, they lifted up one last clawful of leaves, and there he was: Bismark, flaps splayed flat, eyes clamped shut, and an angry welt protruding from the bald spot in the center of his head.

“Oh dear!” Tobin cried, bending low toward his friend. “Bismark? Bismark? Wake up!”

The pangolin’s snout was nearly touching the glider’s tiny face. “Bismark, can you hear me?” he asked. After a moment Tobin straightened and looked at the fox, fear welling in his eyes. “Dawn! He’s not answering! Is Bismark...? Is he...?” Tobin swallowed hard. He tried to speak, but he could not utter the rest.

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