

THE NOCTURNALS

Book Two
The Ominous Eye

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Chapter One

BOOM!



“Really, *amigo*? Another one?” Bismark glided down from his pomelo tree and plopped next to his friend Tobin. It was a small plop, because Bismark was a sugar glider, a tiny marsupial much like a flying squirrel. “If you keep stuffing yourself like a warthog, I’m afraid you might explode!”

Tobin froze, termite in claw, and glanced at his belly. It was the only part of the pangolin’s anteater-like body not covered in hard, brown scales ... and it

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was grumbling loudly. “Just one more,” he said, smiling bashfully.

Tobin opened his mouth and unrolled his long, thin tongue. It was so long, in fact, that it had to be coiled and stored in his stomach. But when it was time to eat—like now—he unfurled it like a long, pink vine.

The pangolin grinned at the fat, wriggly insect. This termite was going to be a good one.

But then a strange noise startled him. “Oh goodness!” Tobin exclaimed. At once, he shot his tongue into his belly, snapped his jaw shut, and curled into a ball. It was the position he took when he became frightened, which happened often and easily. “Did you hear that?” he asked. “I heard a faint sort of rumble!”

“*Mon dieu,*” teased the sugar glider. “Don’t tell me you’re about to blow.”

Bismark scrunched his tiny face and plugged his nose. When the pangolin got really scared, he sometimes released a smell from his scent glands that was so stinky, it could knock an angry rhinoceros out cold.

“Oh goodness, Bismark! It’s not that,” Tobin said. He peeked through his claws at the leaves of the tree overhead. They were moving, but he could not feel any wind. “Listen!”

Bismark sighed and cupped his tiny ear with one

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paw. “I *do* hear something...” he mused. The sugar glider thoughtfully stroked his chin as he tried to identify the strange vibration. Then, suddenly, he pumped his small fist in the air. “Eureka!” he cried. “But of course! It’s the beating of my true love’s heart. My ravishing Dawn must be near.”

Quickly, the sugar glider licked his paws, smoothed his fur over the bald spot in the center of his scalp, and searched for signs of the fox. She was the leader of the Nocturnal Brigade—the group the three friends had formed to protect the animals of the valley who needed their help. She also happened to be Bismark’s not-so-secret love.

Sure enough, Dawn emerged from the brush with a soft patter. Her amber eyes were alert and darted over her surroundings.

“I knew it!” declared Bismark proudly. “And now that I see you and your radiant red fur, *mon amour*, I’m shaken straight to the core.”

“Shaken, yes,” Dawn said breathlessly.

Slowly, Tobin uncurled and stood up. The rumble grew louder, and he felt a tremor beneath him. The pangolin glanced at the ground. Pebbles jumped at his feet. “The earth! It’s moving!”

“My silly *amigo*—that is just what it feels like

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when my beautiful Dawn comes into view!”

“There’s no time for romance,” said Dawn. The tawny fur along her back stood up like blades of wild grass. “We need to take cover. These tremors are growing larger.”

“Nonsense!” cried Bismark. “The only thing growing is the surge of love in my heart! And it is all for you, my lady!”

Ssssssss. A faint hiss rose from the ground.

Bismark let out a high-pitched shriek and leaped onto Dawn’s back. “By all that glides! Is that a snake I hear?”

“No,” said the fox, “but let’s move. We need to find a safe place at once.” She pointed uphill, at a boulder with a large hole carved into it. Then she plucked Bismark from her back and bounded toward it, seeking its shelter.

As the trio dashed through the trees toward high ground, the hiss around them turned into a sizzle. Soon, the ground was crackling and popping beneath their paws. Dawn leaped into the hole in the boulder, and Bismark and Tobin followed.

Bismark clutched Dawn’s slender leg while Tobin hesitantly peered past the rock’s edge.

“Oh no,” cried the pangolin. “Look!”

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In the distance, a thick veil of steam spiraled through the night air. As the wind picked up speed, the steam billowed toward the three friends. The moon flashed in and out from behind the sheet of white clouds.

Tobin shut his eyes tight, dizzy from the sudden humidity and the rapid changes of light. The scent of rotten eggs filled his sensitive nostrils as the steam spread over the animals and blanketed them in a haze.

The frightened cries of other creatures echoed from beyond the trees. The bushes rustled and shook as animals throughout the valley bolted through the forest in search of safe places to hide. The Brigade, however, held their ground and each other.

Bismark wiped a thick bead of sweat from his brow then fanned himself with the wing-like flaps that connected his arms and legs. “Is it just me,” he gasped, “or is it getting hot out here?”

A low hum rang through the air. The pangolin felt his heart shake as the sound grew to a growl, drowning out everything else.

Then, suddenly, all was still. The ground no longer shook. The air no longer rang. The animals, the branches, the leaves—all fell quiet.

“Phew!” exclaimed Bismark. The sugar glider brushed some loose dirt off his flaps. “What a doozy!”

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That shaking, that groaning, that heat?” He exhaled with great relief. “*Muy caliente!* At least it’s over...”

BOOM!

A giant blast shook the earth. The ground rocked and the wind roared and the three animals grasped one another in terror. A giant column of smoke rose up from the distant hills. And then, all went black.