

Wing & Wick

A fable of love and letting go

— BY —

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*For every love that burned too bright for the world to
hold.*

*For every heart that was never quite certain it was
loved in return.*

*And for the ones who learned, in the end, to be their
own light.*



ABOUT THE BOOK



What if loving someone different was the very thing that
made you whole and shine alone?

A luminous fable about impossible love, courage, and
becoming. Some loves are not meant to last. Some are
meant to transform.

They were never meant to meet - the vast, endless dark and
the small, wandering light. One ruled the night; the other
was born to burn bright and brief, then vanish. Yet Arion
the owl and Tiara the firefly loved each other completely
and unconditionally.

He asked nothing of her light but to witness it. She asked
nothing of his darkness but to be held within it. Theirs was
no half-love, no longing left unanswered. It was whole and
true, and yet it could not stay.

For some loves are not meant to be kept, only carried -
proof that to love without holding and to release without
breaking, is the bravest thing a heart can do.

DEDICATION



This book took everything I had. It also took everyone who has ever loved me. I wrote this book to find out if love, once given fully, ever really disappears. The people below are how I already knew the answer. Some of it I am only now, in writing this book, learning how to measure.

To my husband, my rock, my quiet constant. Thank you for holding space for every version of me.

To my daughters, you are the two most beautiful things I have ever made, more beautiful than any sentence in this book. Everything I know about unconditional love, I learned from you.

To my mother, who writes more beautifully than I ever will and who first placed a pen in my hand and told me what to do with it.

To my father, who always believed I was made for bigger things, long before I believed it myself. I miss you every day. I hope this reaches you and that it makes you proud.

To my sister, forever the optimist, the believer, the one who never once doubted this book would exist - you were right, as usual.

And to my family, whole and wide for a lifetime of love I am still learning to count.

This is a book for anyone who has ever loved bravely and let go with grace.

It is for everyone who has loved someone they could not keep and kept loving it anyway and for those who have waited, patiently, faithfully, in the dark, for a light that was worth the waiting.

I hope my writing finds the softest part of you and makes it ache for a love that could never close the distance.



PREFACE



In a world ruled by silence and light, where owls glided without sound and fireflies glowed by the pulse of instinct, love had always followed law.

But when an owl named Arion, born of shadow and flight, met a firefly named Tiara, daughter of the glowing colonies, something forbidden flickered into being.

They spoke in spirals. They touched in glances. They fell slowly, deeply, perhaps fatally, in love.

This is a story about that kind of love. The kind that arrived without asking. The kind that crossed the distance between two entirely different worlds, different skies, different laws, different ways of measuring time and simply was, regardless of whether the world had made room for it. The kind that outlawed itself simply by existing. The kind that changed one so completely that afterward, it was impossible to remember who one had been before it arrived. It was also the kind that could not stay. Not in this life. Not in this arrangement of the world.

And yet it did not leave. That was the thing no law of forest or colony had ever quite managed to extinguish. Some loves were simply older than the rules made to contain

them. They moved through distance the way light moves through water slowed, bent, made strange by the medium, but not stopped. Never fully stopped.

But this was also a story about the cruellest of all uncertainties: the love you were never quite sure had been real. The devotion offered freely, and the silence that followed. The question that lived in the space between a confession and a disappearance, between a beautiful word spoken in the dark and the door that quietly closed after.

Was it love? Tiara never knew. Not for the longest time. And that, perhaps, was the truest tragedy of all.

It was a love that had refused to be only one thing, in only one time, between only two creatures who happened to find each other in a single forest, in a single life. It was unconditional. It was magical. It was beyond any distance the forest had ever mapped.



CHAPTER ONE



There was a forest that most maps did not bother to name.

It sat at the end of a long path that began in a village so small, wound through an open farmland where the light lay flat on the grass, and then, without announcement, became something else entirely. The hedgerows thickened. The light acquired depth. The air changed its character. The path narrowed as the trees took over. Their roots broke through the path like the knuckles of buried hands. Their canopies closed above your head in a vault of green so layered, so dense, that the light came through not as light but as memory - filtered and softened - changed by all it had passed through.

The trees there were ash and elm, and oak of a size that made the word oak seem inadequate. Their bark, grey and deep-furrowed, carved by centuries of weather into something that resembled writing in an undeciphered language. Ivy moved up in slow spirals around them and the moss occupied every horizontal surface.

Walk long enough and the forest let in fragments of something. A brightness. A sound. Between the trunks came the suggestion and then the certainty, of open water.

Salt in the air. The clean emptiness that only the sea produces.

The path ended at a bench on the left, set back slightly from where the trees released one into the open. The bench was made of dark wood that had weathered to the colour of smoke. It faced forward, where the path opened onto a headland above the sea. Someone had placed it there deliberately, years ago, and it had become, simply, a fact of the place.

From the bench one could see everything. The cliff edge, softened by long grass and sea pink. The water below, which was never quite the same colour - grey green in the morning, deep blue at noon, gold and violet in the last hour before dark. The horizon, which the sea offered with such generosity, felt as if it should cost something.

Serenwood, this was where the story lived, not exactly on the bench, not exactly in the forest, but in the space the forest contained, in the quality of the air between the old trees, in the hours when the dark was deep and the canopy filtered the moon into something intimate and close. Between the forest behind and the sea ahead, the bench held the pause like a held breath.

Serenwood was an old forest - older than the parliament of owls who ruled it, older than the firefly colonies who lit it each season without ever asking who'd named it first. The forest kept its own time. Something in the slow black water beneath the roots, something in the dusky light that never quite reached noon, slowed it. A firefly born in the open meadows lived a single summer and called it a life. Or if one was lucky to be born in Serenwood's hush, lived to see several summers. No one could explain why. It was a place

that had always had the character of a secret, even in daylight. At night, with the fireflies in the grass and the owls in the high branches and the sea a steady whisper in the distance, it became something else entirely.

It became the kind of place where impossible things felt, for a little while, possible.



CHAPTER TWO



Of the many creatures who made their home in the Serenwood forest at the edge of the sea, it was the owl who claimed it most completely.

His name was Arion, and he lived in the great hollow oak, the oldest of the old trees, the one whose canopy spread wide enough to shelter the undergrowth for twenty feet in every direction since he was young enough to need shelter himself. That was long ago. He did not need shelter anymore. He stayed because the oak had shaped itself around him, and he around it, in the patient, mutual way of creatures and places that have decided to belong to each other.

He was, by any measure the forest recognised, magnificent. His wingspan, when he opened it fully, darkened the space beneath him like a weather event. His feathers were the colour of the hour between dusk and proper dark, that deep, warm brown. At the edges of his primary feathers, the colour deepened: the brown of old wood, of river water over stone, of the forest floor in autumn when the leaves came down and had been rained on.

His eyes were amber and held the dark. They were amber like a candle flame: warm, alive, responsive to the air around them. He saw as well in darkness as other creatures saw in full daylight, but as a medium. The dark was his element. His eyes moved through as a musician's hands move through music: knowing where to find things, knowing how to listen for what the senses had not yet confirmed.

He was handsome, and he knew that. He did not arrange his feathers. He did not perform his stillness for anyone. He was simply what he was - powerful, precise, built for a purpose that he had fulfilled so completely that the purpose had become invisible. It had become the shape of him.

The younger owls admired him. They watched how he hunted with a patience that looked like indifference until the moment it became something decisive and final. They tried to imitate the quality of his quiet but rarely managed it.

What the forest did not fully understand, what even Arion did not fully understand about himself, was the interior. The part that lived behind the amber eyes, behind the settled quiet, behind the reputation. That seemed considerably more complicated.

He felt things more deeply than he realised, whenever he allowed himself to notice.

The quality of the night on certain evenings, the blue-black of a clear winter sky, the way frost changed the smell of the bark, the sound of the sea on nights when the wind carried it all the way through the trees - landed in him not as observations but as experiences. He had never told anyone.

He was not sure he had the language for it, or even wanted it, because having words for things tends to require that he had to deal with them.

Underneath the competence and the quiet and the magnificent wingspan, he was sensitive but he had spent considerable effort concealing it. Not out of shame but out of protective instinct. The world, the parliament of owls occupied, was a world of function, of role and of expectation hardened into law by centuries of practice. There was not much room in that world for an owl who felt the quality of the night air as something more than temperature and wind-speed. So, he kept that part of himself: private, interior, belonging to him alone.

He loved the forest, though. That, at least, he did not conceal. He flew its borders every evening without needing to, covering paths he had covered ten thousand times, attending to the small changes. He was a meticulous keeper of the place, in the quiet way of someone who loves something without making a declaration of it.

Sometimes, in the deep hours of the night, he would land on the old bench at the end of the path and sit facing the sea, the wind off the water moving through his feathers, the horizon dark and infinite before him.

He was not waiting for anything. He told himself this.

This was, of course, not entirely true.



CHAPTER THREE



In the meadow at the heart of the forest in Serenwood, where the old trees pulled back to allow a circle of open sky, the firefly colony lived in the long grass between the primrose roots and the creek that ran cold and clear from somewhere deeper in the wood.

The sparkle of fireflies was beautiful, all of them, to produce their own light. On summer evenings the meadow filled with a thousand small lights rising and dipping and responding to each other in the intricate choreography of their kind and the effect was something like music made visible. Something like joy with a body.

Among them was Tiara.

Even among creatures of exceptional loveliness, she was exceptional. Born in the midnight hush, her glow was not the pale yellow-green that most of her kind produced. It was deeper, warmer, with a quality of gold in it that made the other lights look, by comparison, dimmer. When she rose, the meadow noticed not consciously, but in the small, involuntary ways: a reorientation, a turn of many small heads, a momentary brightening of the lights around her, as if her glow were contagious.

She was slender and quick, with wings that caught the light at their edges like the borders of a flame and she moved through the air with the easy confidence of someone who has never seriously questioned their right to take up space. She danced. It was the accurate word for what fireflies do, but with Tiara it was more than the word implies. She danced with her entire self, as if the movement were a form of thought made visible.

Her beauty was the kind that functions as a barrier. Not because she intended it that way. She was, underneath the extraordinary glow and the dancer's confidence, genuinely warm, genuinely interested in the creatures around her, genuinely glad to be in the world. But the radiance had its own effect, which was to make her slightly unreachable in the imagination of most who encountered her. She seemed to be living in a register that did not quite correspond to their own. Like a song that is perfect and therefore difficult to hum along to.

The firefly boys of her colony were, almost without exception, quietly devoted to her. They brought her the best resting-leaves, the most sheltered spots in the long grass, the clearest views of the open sky. They did this without ever quite expecting anything in return. She accepted all of it with a graciousness that was genuine.

But she was slightly distracted, as if undecided about what she wanted. She was not quite satisfied with the meadow nor was she dissatisfied with it. It was her world; she loved it. But she drifted to its edges. Always. On every flight, no matter the intention, she found herself moving outward toward the place where the meadow met the wood, where the long grass thinned and the old roots began, where the

trees closed overhead, and the firefly light could not quite reach. She was looking for something. She could not have described what it was, nor did she ever admit it to her sisters. She only knew that the meadow beautiful, familiar, entirely hers was not quite the whole answer to the question she had not yet learned to ask.

She gave freely. This was perhaps her most defining quality. She was generous with her light, with her time, with the warmth she offered without calculation. She gave not out of strategy or obligation, but out of a genuine orientation toward others that she had been born with and had never thought to question. The colony trusted her. They looked to her in the uncertain moments. She held her light steady when others flickered. She stayed when others fled.

She was aware of her own qualities. She knew she was beautiful. She knew her glow was different. The combination of genuine warmth and consciousness of her power was read, by those who did not know her well, as unapproachability or simply intimidating. But to those who did know her, it was simply Tiara as natural and unmistakable as her light.

She had not yet met anything or anyone, that required her to be more than she already knew how to be.

That was about to change.



CHAPTER FOUR



The moon hung like a sliver of polished bone against the ink-dark sky. Below, in the heart of the ancient wood, a parliament of owls held their solemn session.

Among them sat Arion. That night his mind wandered. A strange restlessness stirred within him, like a word heard once in a dream and woken, unable to remember. He excused himself from the parliament and took to the sky, flying toward a secluded glade where the trees parted to reveal the meadow bathed in soft, silver moonlight.

And it was there that he saw her.

She was dancing. She and her sisters filled the meadow with their gentle, pulsating light like a silent symphony of joy and freedom. But Tiara's light moved differently. Brighter and steadier. More purposeful. While the others flickered and scattered like unfinished thoughts, her glow had the intention of something chosen.

Arion landed silently on a branch overlooking the meadow and watched. He had been taught to see fireflies as insignificant things, as if their light were merely decorative, beneath notice. But as he watched Tiara, something in that teaching cracked.

She was not flickering.

She was..... he searched for the word. Her light moved with intention he could not name but could somehow read, the way one sometimes understands a piece of music without knowing what instrument produces the sound.

Tiara felt a sudden stillness in the air. A shadow had settled over the meadow - not the shadow of a cloud, but of something watchful. Something alive. She looked up.

Her sisters, sensing the predator, dimmed their lights and scattered in an instant. But Tiara did not flee. She held her ground, her light flickering. She looked at the owl on the branch above her with a gaze that was neither fearless nor afraid. It was, somehow, curious.

There was something in the owl's eyes she could not have explained. It was not hunger. It was not the flat, professional attention of a predator assessing prey. There was something in that gaze - a silent intensity that belonged not to a hunter but to a lonely wanderer who had stumbled upon a long-lost home.

She did not run. He did not speak.

And so, they remained - the owl and the firefly, held in a moment that the forest would never quite recover from.

The world around them seemed to withdraw, leaving only the two of them: a creature of the night and a creature of the light, their separate worlds meeting in the space between.



CHAPTER FIVE



Their first meeting had been a silent one - a moment of shared wonder under the vast, unblinking eye of the moon. But the memory of it lingered: a persistent glow in Arion's mind and a gentle hum in Tiara's heart.

The following night, drawn by an invisible thread, they both returned to the meadow. This time there was no parliament of owls, no chorus of fireflies. There was only the quiet hum of the night and an unspoken understanding, but absolute that this was where they needed to be.

The first conversation was halting and strange. He had a low, rumbling voice that she felt more in her wings than heard with her ears. She communicated in blinks and small drifts and the occasional chirp that she was embarrassed about afterward.

But something in the attempt - the sheer awkward effort of two entirely different creatures trying to understand each other made them both try harder. And trying harder made them both funnier. And that's what made it the most intimate thing between them.

By the second week, they were coming back every night. By the third week, Tiara stayed until the sky went grey at

the edges and her kind were all long asleep in the grass, and she hovered at his branch, the two of them in the middle of something that could not wait until tomorrow.

He made her laugh. That was the thing she had not expected. She had expected owls to be solemn and wise, and faintly terrifying. He was all those things, but he was also, when no one was watching, genuinely and helplessly funny.

And so, their secret conversations began. They could not speak the same language, but they found their ways. Arion would share his world with her, his hoots a symphony of the night, telling tales of the moon and the stars, of silent soaring flights, of the ancient wisdom of the forest. He did voices. He could imitate the pompous evening robin who announced himself every dusk and the old toad by the creek who told the same three stories in rotation and believed each time that he was saying something new. He performed these impressions with absolute seriousness, which made them unbearable. She would dissolve into her stuttering flicker-laugh, and he would watch her with great satisfaction, as if her laughter were a thing he had made with his hands and was quietly proud of.

Tiara would dance for him. Her light was a paintbrush on the canvas of the night, painting stories of her life, of the sun-drenched days she spent hidden among the leaves, of the brief, beautiful moments of her existence. She told him about the swarm: its politics and gossip, the ancient elder who claimed to remember a summer when the meadow stretched all the way to the mountains. She told him about her restlessness, the way she always ended up at the edge of

things, the way the grass felt too small, and the sky felt like a question she did not know how to answer.

He listened with his whole body, utterly still, amber eyes holding her words as if they were worth keeping. Nobody listened as he did. She had not expected that either.

They talked about everything and nothing. About the quality of light just after a storm. About whether the stars were watching their backs. About the loneliness of being built for the dark he said this once, quietly, almost to himself, and she went very still and said: *I know exactly what you mean.*

And something shifted between them. Not dramatically. Just a degree or two. The way a door opens just enough to let in warmth.

She could not ride the heights he flew, and he could not risk being seen but he lifted off the branch and glided low, just above the meadow grass, slowly enough that she could keep pace beside him. Her light was a small moving warmth at his right wing. It was the closest thing to flying together that their respective natures permitted.

He showed her how he read the sky. He had names for the stars which were nothing like the names her elders used. The owls named them by function: the one that marks the turn of the western wind, the one that tells you the creek will flood within three days, the one that appears only when the temperature is falling fast enough to matter. Navigation, not mythology. He explained this without apology and she found it, unexpectedly, more beautiful than mythology. It was the way he described the idea of a sky that was not

decoration but instruction, that told you things you needed to know if one had to, to survive the night.

“Do you always know where you are?” she asked.

“In the sky, yes,” he said. “On the ground, considerably less often.”

It was the first time she had heard him make a joke about himself.

Later that night, when she asked him about the parliament, he was quiet long enough that she thought he was not going to answer. Then he began, slowly, to describe it. The hollow of the great hornbeam tree where they convened. The precise order in which the senior owls were permitted to speak, oldest to youngest and then youngest to oldest in the second round, a tradition so old that no one alive knew its origin but everyone maintained it with the absolute rigidity of things. The silence in that hollow was different from all other silences - heavier, more judgmental, more certain of its own authority. And his father’s seat.

He described all of this without complaint. She had the sense that complaint was not a language he had been offered. But there was a precision, an attention to detail that went beyond mere reporting that told her he had spent a great deal of time sitting inside this life and looking at it very carefully from the inside.

“Do you want it?” she said. “The seat. The authority. The thing they are preparing you for.” He considered this for so long that the question seemed to have dissolved into the night air. “I want to want it,” he said. “I am not sure that is the same thing.”

She understood something then that she could not have articulated but that settled into her. He was lonely. Not for lack of company, but for lack of anyone who looked at him and saw past the shape they had already decided he was.

After much thought she replied: “I see you.”

It was too large for the moment, and she was not yet sure she had the right. But she did, and it changed the temperature of everything that came after.

They stayed out past the sky’s turning from black to a shade of dark blue that comes just before colour returns to the world. She was late getting back. Her sisters were already stirring in the grass. She slipped in among them and tucked her light to a low, inconspicuous pulse so nobody would notice.

She lay in the grass and thought about the star that marks the western wind. She thought about a creature who wanted to want things he did not quite want.

She couldn’t stop thinking about Arion and how lonely he really was.



CHAPTER SIX



It was Tiara, who decided where to meet. She was the one who found the hollow beneath the fallen birch, who tested the moss under the old shrub for how well it hid a glow, who learned which bend in the creek let her cross unseen. Arion came where she led. She told herself this was simply practicality that he had a parliament to answer to and that she did not. She never really examined too closely the small, quiet weight of always being the one to choose.

Their meetings were their secret - a world of their own, woven in the heart of the forest. They had to be careful. The forest had eyes and ears, and the laws of their communities were as old and unyielding as the ancient trees.

An owl and a firefly. It was a union that was not just forbidden; it was, by the reckoning of their respective kinds, simply unthinkable.

Time passed and without either of them knowing, they developed a language.

Three quick blinks from her: *I missed you.*

One slow wingspread and fold from him: *I am glad you are here.*

Two pulses close together: *I am thinking of something I am not sure how to say.*

A long, slow glow from her not bright but sustained, like a candle meant *that something was too tender to translate.*

He had a way of tilting his head just slightly left when he found something she said surprising that pleased him. She had catalogued this without meaning to. She found herself, sometimes, saying things designed to produce it.

She had a way of hovering an inch closer when she was about to say something true. He had noticed this too. He would go very still when she moved closer, so as not to startle her back.

They left each other messages in the hours they could not share. A spiral drawn in golden light in the air above the primrose: *I miss you more than I can say.*

A feather left pressed into the moss at the base of the tree: *I was thinking of you while you slept.*

This was their private language: built from attention, from the patient study of each other across the dark, from all the things that only become visible when you look at someone long enough and carefully enough to learn the grammar of them.

Nobody else could read it. Nobody else ever would.

Some nights, though, he arrived late or arrived and was not quite there - present in body, his eyes on her, his voice answering hers, but some other part of him folded away somewhere she could not follow. She never asked where he went in those moments.

She never knew, on those nights the oak took a beat too long to glow, that Arion was already there - wings half-spread, rooted at its base, talking himself out of the flight he'd take anyway. He always did. What frightened him wasn't the arguing itself, which he'd grown used to, but the way it kept getting louder instead of fading. He didn't know what that meant. Or maybe he did and simply couldn't let himself finish the thought. She only saw the delay. She told herself every creature needed a room in themselves that stayed locked and that this did not mean anything about her, about them, about whether he wanted this as much as she did. She told herself that more nights than she would have liked to admit.

One night she told him about her first glow.

“Every firefly had one: the bioluminescence comes in fully, no longer the fitful sparks of infancy but the real and permanent light that defines each. For most it happens quietly, privately, unremarked. For me it had happened in the middle of a colony gathering. Two hundred fireflies had assembled in the long grass for the midsummer rite and my light had come in all at once, sudden and total. It was golden and warm that the gathered lights around her dimmed by comparison. Every head had turned to notice it.”

“Were you frightened?” he said.

“No,” she said. Then: “Yes. Not of the light. Of what it meant. To be seen that way before you have decided what you want to be seen as.”

He understood this more than she had expected him to. He had had his own version of it - a hunt, at sixteen months, where he had found and taken prey that the senior owls had

been watching for a week and failing to catch. They had applauded him. It had been, he said, one of the loneliest moments of his life.

They looked at each other across the impossible arithmetic of their difference - an owl and a firefly, a creature of darkness and a creature of light and found, in the space between them, a perfect and unexpected understanding.

They understood being exceptional was its own kind of exile. Being seen for your brightness before anyone had thought to ask what it was underneath. Having your nature decided for you before you had finished deciding it yourself.

“What do you want to be seen as?” he asked. “Now, I mean. If you could choose.”

She thought about it seriously, which was the only way she thought about things.

“Someone who stayed,” she said finally. “When it was difficult. Someone who didn’t leave just because the cost of staying showed itself.”

He was quiet for a long time.

“I want to be that too,” he said.

She heard, underneath the simplicity of it, that he was not quite sure how. She did not say so. She simply moved an inch closer and let the silence between them hold it.

She also told him about her colony. Not the politics and gossip she had described before, which had been the easy version. The real version. She talked about her mother, who had dimmed early and spent Tiara’s childhood in the deep grass, barely visible. The elder sister who had left the colony the season before Tiara’s first glow and sent word

back occasionally and then not at all. The way the colony had looked to Tiara, to be the light that steadied them and the loneliness of being the one others looked to for steadying, when she was not at all certain herself, if she were steady enough.

“I perform it well,” she said. “The certainty. I learned to.”

“I know,” he said.

“How?”

“Because I do it too.”

It was, perhaps, the most intimate thing they had said to each other. More intimate than any of the coded messages in the moss, more intimate even than the way her light fell across his feathers in the rain.

She pulsed, then gathered her glow to its fullest and held it steady, close to the bark of the oak, so that the patterns of the wood became visible. The grain of the bark, the small geography of its ridges and valleys, the moss in the crevices, suddenly luminous at its edges.

“This is what I see,” she said, “when I want to see something properly.”

He had not known, before this, what the oak he lived in looked like in firefly light. He looked at it now as if for the first time and felt, oddly, that it was the first time. That what he had been seeing before was simply a version of the tree and this was the tree itself.

She had a habit of doing that. Making him see things he had stopped seeing.

She flew home before dawn. In the morning, while the colony slept around her, she was still thinking about it: the

strange relief of being known without explaining oneself. The feeling of being seen past the brightness, into the something underneath.

She thought: *"I did not know it was possible to feel this way with another creature. This is going to cost me something. But I am going to pay it anyway. "*



CHAPTER SEVEN



One night in late autumn, as they sat together in their secret place, the rain fell - gentle, the first they had ever watched fall side by side. Tiara, who had never been caught in rain before, shivered against the cold weight of the drops. She folded herself small beneath a primrose petal, but the stem bent with the rain's weight and the shelter failed.

Without hesitation, Arion swooped down from his branch and spread one great wing above her. He landed beside her in the moss and simply extended himself: a canopy of dark feathers against the rain. It was the first time they had been close enough to touch.

Tiara's light, startled, flared brilliant gold and then, slowly, softened. Under the shelter of his wing, she pulsed her glow upward, illuminating the intricate architecture of his feathers. The patterns she had studied from a distance were now suddenly intimate and close.

"You are my sky," she flashed.

Arion went very still. It was a long time before he responded. When he did, his hoot was barely audible a sound shaped more by feeling than by intention.

"And you are my star."

In that moment, nestled together in the rain, they were not an owl and a firefly. They were simply two creatures who had found each other in the dark and for one suspended, fragile hour, that was enough.

Later, Tiara wondered if she had imagined the tenderness in his voice. She replayed the moment in her memory, searching for certainty, for proof. She would never find it. Not entirely. That was the first seed of the question that grew inside her for the rest of her life.

She noticed it first. She was in the middle of a perfectly ordinary conversation he was doing his toad impression; she was mid-laugh and she caught herself thinking:

"I want to do this forever. "

Not the impression. Not specifically this conversation. Just this. Him. The dark between them. The way the night felt when he was in it.

She landed from that thought from a great height: suddenly aware of how far off the ground she was. She finished laughing. She blinked her normal blinks. She said the things she would normally say. But something had rearranged inside her and she flew home that night knowing that a line had been crossed that she had not seen coming and could not now uncross.

She did not tell him. Because what would she say and in what language? What would it change? And what if she was wrong about what she felt? And what if she was right? And what then, with all the impossible match they were to each other? A million questions flashed her mind.

Arion noticed it later. It came to him one evening when she was not there. Tiara was late, caught up with the swarm and he sat in the oak feeling empty. Not loneliness. He knew loneliness. This was different. This was the shape of her, missing.

He sat with it for the hour until she arrived. And when she arrived and blinked her three-pulse hello, the relief of it was so disproportionate to the situation that he understood, with the sinking clarity, that he was in love with her.

He could not have said when it happened. Love, he was discovering, did not arrive with a knock.

He said nothing. He did nothing differently. He did the toad impression. He listened to her talk. He watched her stutter-flicker with laughter and felt it land in his chest and thought:

"This is the thing. This is what I cannot have. This is what I am going to love anyway. "

And so, they continued, two creatures who both knew and neither had said, talking all night about everything except the one thing.

Knowing did not make it simpler. If anything, it made the nights he pulled back harder for her to read because how could a creature who loved her, by his own private admission, still leave gaps she could not name? She did not have his answer. She would not have it for a long time. She only had the nights for themselves: some full, some half-empty in a way she could feel but not describe, with no reliable way of telling, from where she stood.

*A memory etched forever
A piece of each other left glowing in the dark.
Two souls, one night, one quiet spark and a
small, luminous forever.*



CHAPTER EIGHT



Their stolen moments of joy were always threaded with fear. The forest was not a forgiving place, and the laws of their kind were absolute. The parliament of owls, with their rigid traditions and their deep-seated order, would never accept one of their own loving a firefly. The firefly elders, in turn, saw the owls as nothing more than silent, merciless hunters. The thought of one of their own consorting with such a creature was a betrayal of the deepest kind.

Their secret was a heavy burden. They began to see suspicion in the eyes of their family and friends. Arion's nocturnal hours grew shorter, his attention wandering, his gaze often lost somewhere far from the path before him. Tiara's dances became less exuberant, her light sometimes dimming as she retreated into her own thoughts. The weight of their forbidden love was a slow-acting thing, seeping into the very fabric of their days.

One night, as they were saying their reluctant goodbyes, a twig snapped nearby. Arion immediately shielded Tiara with his body, his eyes scanning the darkness with every hunter's instinct firing at once. A pair of bright, curious eyes peered at them from behind a bush. It was a young

firefly, one of Tiara's own. He had followed her, his curiosity roused by her strange, solitary nightly excursions. His light flickered in confusion and then in shock as the impossible truth settled over him. He turned and fled, his glow a frantic, panicked streak in the darkness.

The secret was out.

The news spread through the firefly community like light through still water: swift, total, unstoppable. Tiara, once the brightest and most beloved of her kind, was now an outcast. Her sisters recoiled at her approach, their lights dimming in disapproval. The elders of the firefly council summoned her for a trial and their lights a cold, judgmental blue, their voices a chorus of condemnation.

She had been in the council circle before, once to receive her colony citation at midsummer and another time to give testimony about a disputed foraging boundary. Both times the elders' lights had been their usual amber, the warm, inclusive gold of a fire that considers you part of its warmth.

This time they were blue. Every one of them, cold blue that the colony used only for the gravest proceedings, a colour that did not occur in nature and had been cultivated over generations precisely because it did not. It was the colour of judgment that has already been reached and was now simply being delivered.

There were seven of them in the circle. She knew all their faces. Elder Maren, who had taught her the creek-path routes in her first season. Elder Sollis, whose daughter had danced beside Tiara at the midsummer rite three years running. Elder Phoss, the oldest, nearly transparent with

age, whose light had faded to the palest of golds but now in its blue configuration, a strange and ghostly violet.

None of them looked at her as if she were someone they had known.

"You will account for yourself," Elder Maren said. Her voice, Tiara noted, was perfectly steady. There was no anger in it. Anger, at least, would have acknowledged that Tiara was someone capable of provoking feeling. This was something colder: the tone of someone addressing a problem that has occurred.

Tiara had decided, on the way there, that she would not pretend. She was done with the version of herself that made her easier for others to bear. She stood in the centre of the circle and let her light glow at its natural register - warm gold, unapologetic, the same light she had carried every night of her life and she said:

"I met someone who saw me. I spent time with him because the time we spent together was the most honest I have ever passed. He is not what you believe him to be."

"He is an owl," Elder Sollis said.

"Yes."

"He hunts our kind."

"He has never harmed anyone in this colony. He has never harmed me. He would not."

"You cannot know that" Elder Phoss said, and his voice was the only one that held something like grief in it.

"You are young and you have been charmed. It is not your fault. But charm is not character and a creature's nature

does not change because it has learned to be gentle with one particular thing."

"His nature," Tiara said, "is more complicated than you are willing to consider."

The silence that followed was not of creatures considering what she had said. It was the silence of creatures who had already finished considering and were now waiting, with a patience that had become indistinguishable from contempt, for her to run out of things to say.

She tried.

She told them about the night in the rain, the private language, the way he described the parliament and she had understood, without a word being translated, exactly what it cost him. She told them about the stars named by function.

She told them about what he had said - *I want to want it, I am not sure that is the same thing*, because it seemed to her the most important evidence she had, the thing that proved he was not what they feared.

The elders listened without moving. When she had finished, Elder Maren spoke.

"The sentence of this council is isolation. Your light will be confined to the western quadrant. Your night-flight privileges are suspended. You will not communicate with the owl by any means. You will perform your colony duties and you will wait."

"And if I refuse?" Tiara said.

The question surprised them. She could see the small, involuntary stiffening of seven sets of wings. It was not a question they had prepared for, because it was not a

question their authority had previously required them to answer.

"Then the consequence will be exile," Elder Maren said finally. "Permanent."

Tiara held her light very still. Not dimmed but controlled. Absolutely controlled.

"I understand," she said.

She did not say: *I accept it*. She understood the difference between those two things and she noticed Elder Phoss, who looked at her for a long moment with something that might, in another face, have been respect. Then he looked away.

"You have betrayed your own kind. You have consorted with a predator, a creature of darkness and death. You have brought shame and danger upon us all."

Tiara tried to explain. She tried to tell them about Arion's gentleness, his wisdom, his loneliness. She tried to make them see the beauty of what they had built together. But her words were lost in the storm of their prejudice and fear. She was sentenced to isolation and her light confined to the darkest corner of the forest, a prisoner in the place she had always called home.

She walked out of the circle alone, her gold light moving through the cold blue of theirs without mixing and she did not look back.

Meanwhile, in the silent world of the owls, the revelation was met with a different but no less devastating response. The parliament convened in an emergency session. The hornbeam hollow held fifteen owls. Every seat was occupied, which it rarely was outside of the formal solstice

sessions. Arion noticed this before he noticed that they had all come, that not even one had decided this was not their business. The message of that was clear before a word had been spoken.

His father sat at the head position, as he always did, his plumage immaculate, his expression carefully arranged in a configuration that Arion had spent his entire life learning to read. It was not anger. His father did not, as a rule, perform anger - anger was too common, too available to lesser creatures. What he performed instead was disappointment held at arm's length, which was considerably more effective.

Arion stood before them his great head not bowed in shame, but in sorrow. He did not deny meeting Tiara in secret. He spoke of her light, her spirit, her courage. He spoke of the connection they shared - a connection that had brought warmth into his world of shadows.

He said: "It is true. I have spent months in the company of a firefly named Tiara. I love it. I will not claim otherwise, and I will not apologise for it."

The silence that followed was the hornbeam hollow's silence, which was, as he had once described to Tiara, the most specifically judgmental silence he knew. He had described it as heavier, more certain of its own authority. Arion did not say: *"It is the silence that I have feared my entire life, because I have always known that one day I would do something this hollow could not accommodate, and I have never known how to prevent it."*

His father waited until the silence had done its work. Then he spoke.

"You have allowed your heart to be swayed by a fleeting flicker in the dark. You have forgotten who you are, Arion. Your world is not a world of light and sentiment. It is a world of duty, of tradition, of survival. This love of yours to be with her is a weakness and a dangerous folly that threatens the very fabric of our existence." His voice, usually a source of comfort, was filled now with a deep, sorrowful gravity.

"With respect," Arion said, "it is not a folly. And she is not a flicker."

"She is a firefly." His father said it with a finality that was meant to end the conversation. He had the skill, honed over decades of parliamentary leadership, of making certain words sound like conclusions. *She is a firefly* was spoken to say *the matter is closed* and as if the category itself were sufficient refutation of anything Arion might offer.

"She is the most remarkable creature I have encountered in my life," Arion said. "She has shown me things about my own world that I had stopped being able to see. She is braver and more honest than most of this parliament and I mean that not as an insult to this parliament but as a true and precise description of what she is."

All the fifteen owls gave him a disapproving look. Fourteen of them looked at him the way the elders had looked at Tiara. The fifteenth was his younger brother Cael, who looked at him with an expression that Arion would think about for a long time afterward. It was not approval. It was something closer to the look of someone watching a thing they know to be necessary but do not have the courage to do themselves.

His father did not raise his voice. He simply said: "You will end it."

"I will not."

This silence was different from the first - shorter and denser. The room was adjusting to a fact it has not previously had to accommodate.

"Then we will discuss what happens next," his father said. And the conversation moved into the register of management of consequence, of containment and Arion stood in the centre of the hollow. He listened and understood, with a clarity that was almost a relief, that the world he had inhabited all his life had just reorganised itself around his absence from it. Not exile. They would not exile him. He was too valuable, too trained, too necessary to the continuation of things. But the warmth was gone. The belonging was gone. He would remain in the hollow of his oak, attend his duties, fly the required routes. He would simply do all of it in a cold that had not been there before.

He had known when he chose her, that there would be a cost. He had not known the cost would be quiet. He had assumed there would be shouting, drama, something that matched the scale of what he felt. Instead, there was simply this: fifteen owls who had decided, without apparent difficulty, that he was now a different category. A beloved aberration. A useful problem.

He flew home before the session had formally closed. Nobody called him back.

He landed in the oak in the dark and sat very still for a long time, feeling the cold of a belonging that had been revoked. Not taken violently but simply withdrawn.

He thought: *"I should go to her. But if I go to her now, they will use it against her. I have to find a way to protect her from what I have just made worse. "*

He sat with that for a long time. Outside, the forest moved through its ordinary business, indifferent and complete.

Arion was not exiled, nor punished in any physical way. His punishment was far more subtle and far crueller. He was met with a wall of silent disapproval and a collective turning of backs from his own kind. He was an owl, and his place was among them. But he was no longer one of them. He was an outsider in his own home. His love for a firefly set him apart from everything he had known.

That night, an unspoken agreement was forged between the two kinds. For the good of both communities, for the preservation of the ancient laws, the owl and the firefly had to be kept apart. There would be no more secret meetings, no more whispered conversations, no more stolen moments. There would only be silence.

The secret meetings, however, did not stop. They only became more careful and aware. Tiara learned to dim her glow to something barely more than moonlight, crossing the garden's edge low and dark and small, a shadow instead of a light, so that nothing watching would think to look twice. She told herself this was no different than before. It was, of course, entirely different.

Arion took his own risks. He learned the meadow's quiet hours and the gap between the colony's evening gatherings. He checked for the deep settling of night when the grass was empty and even the moon seemed to look elsewhere. He flew low over the tree line, wings drawn close, gliding

silently. He chose the long way round, through the gully where the old stream had worn the ground low, so that anyone watching the sky above the meadow would see nothing at all. He told himself he was only checking the borders, as he always had. But he had never timed his border-checking to the hour Tiara came out to meet him.

But then the silences started. Not suddenly. Gradually.

Arion began to be harder to reach. Not absent - he was still there most evenings, still in his oak, still listening when she spoke. But there was withdrawal in him, a new distance behind the familiar stillness, as if someone had moved the furniture in a room she knew well. Some nights he would be quiet in a way that felt like a wall rather than a window.

Some nights she would say something that would have made him do his pleased head-tilt a month ago and instead he would just look at her, amber eyes unreadable. Some nights he ended things early a small, polite version of goodbye that landed like a door quietly closing.

"Was it her? Was it something she had done? Was it nothing just the weather of him, just a season she did not understand yet?"

She turned it over every night like a stone she could not see the underside of. She came up with nothing, which was the worst answer, because nothing left all possibilities open.

What Tiara did not know was that he was terrified. That the love he had named to himself had become a country he could see clearly and could not enter. That every night he spent talking to her cost him something.

He was pulling back because he did not trust himself, afraid that if he kept being entirely present, something would slip through. That he would say what he had not said and could not unsay.

He did not understand that his disappearance was louder than his presence. He did not understand that she was fluent enough in him to know something was wrong and not fluent enough in this new territory to know what.

A great and heavy silence fell between them. Heavier than any word, wider than any distance the forest had yet put between them.

Not literally, not at once but it started that night. A slow retreat disguised as normalcy. He came less. Then less again. Then there was a night she came to the oak and he was not there. He was not there the next night and the night after that. The oak was only an oak again and she understood, with a coldness in her chest that he was not coming.

The seasons changed. The forest shed its green coat for gold and then for white. The world moved on, but for Arion and Tiara, time had stopped still, frozen in the moment of their last, stolen glance.



CHAPTER NINE



One night in late winter, when the air was so cold, Tiara slipped through her swarm and arrived at the oak with the usual blinks, the usual orbit of his branch. Arion was there, quieter than usual even by the new standards of his quiet.

The relief of it moved through her before she had even landed. She had not let herself imagine, over the last string of empty nights, what she would do if the oak stayed dark. She had only kept coming, because the alternative was to stop coming and that felt like a kind of surrender, she was not ready to make. "You weren't there," she said, before she could soften it into something smaller. "I came every night for months and the branch was empty. I told myself you were hunting or resting or..... "

She stopped, because the list of reasons had run out somewhere around the fourth night and what was left after the reasons was just the fear and helplessness.

"I didn't like it. Not finding you."

Arion tilted his head and something in his expression did the thing it always did when he wanted a conversation to end somewhere lighter than where it had started. "An owl

needs his mysteries," he said. "Keeps the meadow interesting. You'd get bored of me otherwise."

It was, as his deflections always were, almost convincing. Almost. Tiara let it go. Not because she believed him but because the evening was short. Evenings always were and she had promised herself, crossing the garden in the cold that she would not spend the little time they had picking at a wound he clearly did not want looked at. There would be time for the question later. There was always, she told herself, going to be a later.

They talked for a while about small things. The toad by the creek had apparently begun a fourth story. The robin had started earlier than usual. Small; safe things.

And then, in the middle of one of his sentences, he stopped.

The silence that followed was unlike any of the others. It was not the silence of someone thinking. It was the silence of someone standing at an edge they had not intended to reach. He shifted along the branch, closer, nudging her gently with the edge of one folded wing. It was his version, she'd learned, of an embrace.

He said: *I love you.*

He said it in his voice low and vowel-shaped, the way he said everything important, without preamble, without buildup. He said it and then looked at her directly, amber eyes entirely open and for one moment there was nothing between them at all.

She opened her light wide with everything she had because she did not yet have words for what was in her and light

was the only language that could hold it. She moved closer. Closer, about to say it back.

He looked at her for a long moment without another word.

And then he disappeared. No goodbye.

Only the branch, still faintly warm where he had been. Only the primrose below, swaying in the displacement of air his wings had made. Only her light, still open, still reaching and glowing into a dark that had closed around her so quickly that she could not say exactly when he had gone. Only that - one moment he was there, and the next she was in it alone, holding out a glow that had no one left to land on.

The branch did not mourn. The forest did not pause. The creek ran on. That was the cruellest part that the world did not mark it. That a love confessed and abandoned in the same breath left no visible scar on anything except the one who had been left holding it.

She waited. She came to the oak every night for months. She sat in the air where they used to talk and tried to understand what had happened in the space between his words and his absence.

She thought about looking for him. She knew the forest. She could have searched. But he had closed the door. His silence was a closed door, she could feel it and she had enough dignity left and enough hurt, not to knock on a door that someone had deliberately shut.

What she never said, in the weeks that followed,

"I keep thinking about what you meant. Not whether you meant it. I know you meant it. I heard it land, I felt it. But

what did you mean to do with it? Was it a gift or a goodbye? Were you putting it down or handing it over? I have turned it over so many times that I have worn the edges off it and I still cannot see the underside.

I hope you are all right. I hope whatever sent you away is not eating you alive the way this question is eating me.

Will I ever know?"



Whisper Sweet Nothings - Will I Ever Know?

*The firefly holds the warmth
of the owl's light close, it touched her gently,
stirred the glow she thought was fading.
Yet her heart trembles with unspoken questions.
But how does she ask if his heart
will guard her glow forever?
If his affection is true, not just born of
moonlight and passing skies?
If the owl wants her for more than
just some lovelorn longing?
She remembers the owl's words, spoken softly.
Words that felt real enough
to light even her darkest corners.
Will he ever speak them again,
or were they meant only for that fleeting twilight?
Were they said with pity, or with the quiet truth of care?
She listens for echoes in the wind,
for the rustle of wings that might carry
those words back to her.
But the forest is quiet now,
and she wonders if some words live only once,
yet linger forever in the spaces between hearts.
Somewhere between silence and absence,
between a borrowed sky and half-love,
the firefly wonders if she was an afterthought.*

- Tiara



CHAPTER TEN



Three years. A lifetime for a firefly. A mere breath for an owl. For Tiara and Arion, it was something else entirely: an eternity that each of them experienced differently, which is perhaps the truest thing that can be said about what had happened between them.

Tiara was eventually moved to a new colony further west. In the new colony she was polite, quiet and present in all the ways required of her. She danced when there were dances. She performed the rhythms of her kind with the patient accuracy of someone who had learned that performing a life is sometimes all one can manage while waiting to find the way back to living one.

They called her Skyghost, a creature who glowed but did not seem to inhabit the glow. She barely noticed. At night, alone, she climbed to the highest vantage point she could find and sent her light eastward.

The new forest was called Fernwood. It sat in a part of the forest that received less moonlight than her old home. The canopy was denser there, the trees older more possessive of the sky and the fireflies who lived in it had adapted accordingly. Their lights were paler than hers, more

economical, calibrated to a world where light was conserved rather than offered freely. They were not unfriendly. They were simply a colony that had learned, over generations of dim conditions, not to expect too much of the dark.

She did not belong there and she knew it. They knew it too, but nobody said anything – there was no point.

She was given a corner of the long grass near the western edge, where an old willow trailed its fingers into the creek and the sound of the water was constant which she found, unexpectedly, consoling. At the old colony she had slept in the centre of things, surrounded by the lights and movements of her sisters. Here she slept with the sound of the creek and the willow and whatever small nocturnal things moved through the grass. She discovered that solitude, which she had always assumed she would find unbearable, was in fact entirely bearable. What she had thought was a need for company had been, perhaps, a need for a specific company. The general version would not substitute.

She met Lumen in the second week of her getting to Fernwood. He was young, younger than she was by at least a season, with a pale, steady light that matched the colony's register. She recognised his quality of attention immediately, because she had only ever encountered it once before. He listened the way Arion listened: with his whole self, not processing to produce a response, but simply receiving it. Holding it. Treating words as if they were worth the trouble of being heard.

She liked him immediately and then felt guilty for liking him. She then felt something more complicated than guilt.

Lumen asked her no questions about where she had come from or why. The colony presumably knew news of her kind travelled in its own ways, but he behaved as if her history were her own business, which it was and which nobody had thought to treat as such in a very long time.

"You glow differently from everyone else here," he said one evening. Not as a compliment, not as an observation. Just as a fact he had noticed and seen no reason to keep to himself.

"I know," she said.

"It's not bad," he said. "Just different. Like a different instrument playing the same music."

She thought about this for a long time afterward. She was not sure it was the right metaphor. She was not sure she and the Fernwood fireflies were playing the same music at all, but she appreciated the generosity of it.

She let Lumen's company become a small, steady kindness in the grey stretch of her days - someone to sit near when the silence in her chest grew too loud, someone whose attention did not ask anything of her in return. She was careful, though never to let it become more than that. When he brought her the first blossom of the season, she thanked him and did not press it into memory the way she had once pressed a feather into moss. When he lingered a moment too long after saying goodnight, she found some small tasks that called her away.

He never asked why. He already understood that whatever she carried had already been given, entirely, to someone else. In time he stopped lingering. He remained a steady friend. It was exactly the kind of company she could allow

herself: real, warm and never once mistaken by either of them for anything else.

She did not tell him about Arion. She did not tell anyone about Arion. What she had shared with him was hers - their private architecture, their secret language, the specific gold of his amber eyes in the dark and she was not ready to offer any part of it to a world that had already tried to take the whole thing from her. She kept it to herself. She kept it carefully.

But some nights, alone on her high branch with her light turned east, she would let herself remember. Not the ending but the small things. The toad impression delivered with absolute seriousness. The soft left head-tilt. The star that marked the western wind, named by function, not by myth. The night he had described the parliament and she had thought *I see you*.

The rain. She allowed herself to remember the rain. The warmth of being sheltered by him before thinking because it was simply what he would do when something it loved was cold. That memory she could bear to look at. Most nights, it was enough. Most nights, she would just sit and write in the hope that Arion would come back. In the hope that he would send her one coded message - something only meant for her.

Unspoken Signs

*I lived between words never said,
breathed in glances now unread.
I linger where hearts once embraced.
I ache in the stillness your silence made,
a wound that lingers yet will not fade.
I am a river waiting for rain.
If your heart still knows my name,
will you whisper, will you claim?
Send me a sign, I will know it is mine.*

- Tiara

Arion the perfect owl, the perfect hunter on the other hand had mastered the art of living with an open wound. He led hunts. He taught the younger owls. He sat in parliament and spoke with the measured authority his rank required. He was, by every outward measure, healed.

But he flew strange hours. He returned to the meadow when no one was watching, sat on the old branch and looked at the place where the primrose had once bloomed. He dreamed of a specific light with a specific pulse that no dream could accurately reproduce, because some things cannot be remembered precisely, only ached for.

He told himself he was not waiting. But he was.

On one of the nights in deep winter when the cold had emptied the forest of all its usual sounds, he flew to the old meadow and did something he had not done since before the trial. He landed on the bench. He found the exact place where he had once sat with the sea in front of him and the forest behind when she had not yet existed in his life. He sat facing the sea, the dark water, the dark horizon, the stars

that the owls navigated by and that he had once tried to teach Tiara to read. The primrose was long gone. The grass was flattened by frost. Nothing in the clearing showed any sign that two creatures had spent months there building something out of nothing but attention and the honest effort of trying to understand each other.

He sat on the bench for a long time. He thought about her in a contained way he had taught himself to think about her. Like a wound one has learned not to touch. Arion told himself - *I am not waiting for anything*, but he was in fact waiting - sitting there, in the cold, in the exact place he once sat with her. He found the carefully managed distance would not hold.

He missed her. Not the idea of her. **Her**. Her attention when he said something that mattered. The way her light did the involuntary uncontrolled flare when she was genuinely surprised. The exact sound of her stutter-flicker when she laughed.

He had composed a message eleven times since the verdict. He knew this because he had counted. Eleven times - he had found a piece of bark and scratched the beginning of a spiral and then stopped. Stopped because the elders were watching. Stopped because it would make things worse for her. Stopped because he was, underneath the reasonable explanations, afraid - afraid that the silence had become its own answer. That she had learned to live without him, quietly, completely and that his reappearance would not be a gift but an interruption.

He sat on the bench until the cold became something he could no longer ignore. Then he flew back to the hollow of his oak and did exactly what was required of him.

He told himself this was love. Protecting her from the cost of him. He told himself this and he almost believed it, because he had been telling it to himself for so long that he had come to believe it. That the distance had become, over time, a kind of safety. That a love kept entirely interior required nothing. It cost nothing. It could not be rejected. And it could not disappoint you by being, in it.

He knew this and did nothing about it. He did not write to her - not the first year. Not the second year. Nor most of the third.

What Arion and Tiara didn't know was that their love, though buried under layers of guilt and silence, was not dead. It was a seed resilient, stubborn that had been planted in the fertile ground of their hearts and continued to grow, its roots wrapping around their very beings, its presence a constant, low ache. They had been forced apart but they were not separate. They were two halves of a whole, two souls bound by a thread no law had quite managed to cut.

The seasons turned. The forest changed. The third autumn did its patient, inevitable work on the leaves. But the silence between the owl and the firefly remained heavier than any word, more eloquent than any message.

Arion couldn't stop thinking about Tiara. He thought about Tiara in the new colony that he had mapped but never flown to. No one knew he had been tracking from a careful distance. He thought about the eleven pieces of birch bark, scratched with the beginning of a spiral and then abandoned. He thought about the bench and the way she moved that one inch closer when she had something true to say. He thought about what it would cost him to contact her. These were real concerns he had maintained carefully.

He did not know if she was all right. He did not know whether her light was still warm or if the colony had worn it down to something pale and adapted. He did not know if she had stopped looking east. He did not know if there was anything left to find.

He only knew that not knowing was no longer something he was willing to choose. And then, on the third autumn's dusk, he went to the old magpie at the forest's edge and asked her to carry a message. He scratched a spiral into a piece of birch bark.

I miss you more than my wings can hold.



CHAPTER ELEVEN



It should have been impossible. The old magpie was half blind and carried too much pride for her dwindling capacities. But she understood, in her old bones, that some things deserved to be delivered.

Tiara found it just before dawn caught in a thornbush near the edge of camp, a tangle of broken feathers, crushed violet petals and dried grass, all holding together a piece of birch bark that had survived the journey in roughly the same condition as her heart: partially torn, still intact.

She almost walked past it. She had stopped looking for messages years ago. But the violet petals were not native to this part of the forest. The feathers were the precise dark colour she had spent three years trying to forget.

She held the bark close and read the spiral. Her light sparked uncontrolled, brilliant then sputtered, then steadied. She sat with it for a long time.

She read in a single heartbeat, the spiral she could have decoded in her sleep, the words she had imagined arriving so many times that imagining them had become a kind of grief. What she sat with was the fact of it. That he had, after three years, found a way.

Three years was nothing. She was not the same firefly who had stood in the centre of the elders' cold blue circle and said *I will not pretend*. She was still herself and had been careful about that. She had protected the interior self deliberately. She was quieter. More careful with her warmth, not because she had less of it, but because she had learned, in three years of carrying it, that warmth offered without return had a cost she had underestimated.

She looked at the piece of bark. *I miss you more than my wings can hold*. It was a beautiful thing to write. It was exactly the kind of beautiful thing he had always been able to produce - the precise feeling, rendered in a phrase that landed in the right spot in the heart. He had always had that. She had spent three years missing it almost as much as she had missed him.

But she was also aware that sitting there with the bark that a beautiful message sent after three years of silence was not yet an answer. Was it a beginning? It might be the beginning of something. Or was it the thing he sent when the ache had grown great enough to outweigh the inconvenience of reaching out. And that when she responded would be followed by the ache that had been briefly relieved, by another silence.

She did not know yet which it was. She would not know until she responded and watched what happened next.

She held her light steady. She thought about the bench at the edge of a headland and what it had felt like to be sheltered by something that had not needed to be asked.

Part of her wanted to leave the bark where it lay, unanswered, and let three years of silence be met with a

fourth. She let herself feel that fully - the small, vicious satisfaction of making him wait the way she had waited, of letting I am not waiting for anything become his sentence to carry, the way it had once been hers. She was hurt. She let herself know that plainly, without softening it into something kinder than it was. But underneath the hurt sat a harder, more stubborn thing: the not-knowing. Three years of not-knowing had already cost her more than any answer could. She was not willing to spend a fourth year the same way.

She decided, sitting there with the spiral in her hands, that she would write back - but carefully. She would ask him the one question that had sat unanswered longer than any of the others: whether he had truly loved her. Whether, in three years, there had been a single night he had flown to the bench, to the meadow, to any place they had once claimed as theirs and simply never told her. She wanted to know if his silence had been empty or only quiet.

What she did not want, not yet, was to hand him the other truth sitting beside it that she had already read his four words a hundred times over. That something in her chest had lifted and that she was thrilled to hear from him.

She wrote back. She had to.

You found me.

I am not sure what that means.

But I am still here.

The glow never left.

It hid where the owl's shadow fell.

And it fell far too long and wide.

The firefly's wings are torn,

*too shattered, too tender.
Her wings remember flight,
but the heart remembers the fall.
Some lights fade not from choice,
but from too much feeling.*

Then she climbed to her vantage point and watched the eastern sky and waited. She waited in hope and scribbled with light in her diary.

Faith in My Hope

*Despite the shadows, the silence, the night,
when despair dimmed stars and hid every light,
when resolve lay broken, and wounds would not mend,
I cradled a whisper that time would befriend.
Hope was my candle, so small yet so true,
a flicker of promise the dark never knew.
It told me of mornings where sorrows take flight,
where memory blooms into light.
And now, like a river that finds its own sea,
my heart writes a poem of what is yet to be.
A dream where pain turns to grace,
and good things return with a warm, gentle face.*

- Tiara



CHAPTER TWEELEVE



He came after her reply found him, on a night when the moon was full enough to see by, but the clouds were heavy enough to travel undetected. He appeared at the edge of her colony's territory.

He left her another message with the magpie to leave it in the places she would know to look:

*Let the glow return,
for wings await the call
to rise, to soar,
to cradle this moment
on strength unbroken,
never to let it fall.
Back to the forest,
near the towering halls,
where the owl keeps vigil
as the clock strikes two.
May silence guard our secret,
and paths entwine again
beneath the whispering leaves,
where hope still waits for you.*

She read it. And then she left her own reply at the drop-off point:

Owl.

The firefly has lost the path to the forest.

It is no promise to be there.

For the firefly flickers,

caught between fear and faith.

Arion excused himself from the parliament. His heart was a nervous, desperate drum and flew not toward the hunting grounds but toward the part of the forest where he knew Tiara had been exiled. He did not know what he would do or what he would say. He didn't know for sure if she would come to see him. He did know for sure that he had disappointed her. He knew that he had to see her to know if her light still shone in the darkness.

He reached the clearing first and waited.

The bell beyond the trees struck two. He counted it and hated that he counted it. Every small light that moved in the grass became her, briefly, and then wasn't.

He knew how badly he had hurt her. What he did not know, standing there with the cold settling into his feathers, was whether that hurt had hardened past the place a single wingbeat could still reach. Whether tonight was a mercy he had not earned, or a door that was simply never going to open. And if he had mistaken her reply for an invitation because he needed one too badly to read it correctly. He almost left. He told himself, more than once, that going now would spare them both whatever came next. But he decided not to. Because staying is what Tiara would have done.

There she was. He found her in a small, secluded clearing a place he had scouted in secret over the years, his love a compass that had always pointed him in her direction. She was there: a solitary, gentle pulse of light in the deep gloom, sitting quite still on a leaf, her glow a soft, melancholic gold. She was not dancing.

The sight of her so small, so alone, so beautiful was a blow he had not prepared himself for. It undid the last remnants of his resolve.

He landed on a branch overlooking the clearing. He wanted to call out to her, to hoot her name. But the old fear held him - the fear of the consequences, of causing her more pain, of another door shut between them. And so, he did something he had never done before. He unfurled his great wings, their edges catching the faint moonlight and held them there a dark, silent sentinel in the night. A gesture of surrender. Of something exposed.

Tiara, lost in her own quiet sorrow, felt the air change. She looked up and saw a magnificent, dark silhouette against the pale sky. Her heart, which she had believed had forgotten how to feel anything but a low, steady ache, gave a sudden and painful lurch.

She flew to him. Her light was a trembling, golden star as she landed on his outstretched talon. For a long moment they remained like that a statue of light and shadow in the heart of the forest. The silence between them no longer a chasm but something more like a bridge.

"I thought I had lost you," Arion said, his voice low and unsteady.

Despite everything he had cost her, what rose in her first was not anger. It was joy - sudden, complete, almost humiliating in how entirely it arrived. She held it back as best she could, dimming her glow by careful degrees. But she could feel it happening anyway: three years of carefully kept anger, melting in his presence like frost giving way the moment the sun is finally up. And watching the same helpless unravelling move through him, she knew she had done the same thing to him. That she still could.

"You were never lost to me," Tiara answered, her light a soft, warm glow. "You were a constant presence - a silent song in my heart."

"I missed you and thought of you every single day." he said. "I Love You, Tiara."

She wanted to believe him. Every part of her that had kept his letter pressed close for weeks wanted to believe him absolutely. But she was no longer the firefly who had held her ground in the meadow with uncomplicated courage. She had spent three years learning that love and loss occupied the same territory. She believed him partly. As much as she could.

"Arion. Why did you stop? There were years - long years when I sent my light every night. I heard nothing. I need to understand that."

He was quiet for a time.

"It was dangerous," he said finally. "The elders were watching. I was trying to protect you."

She nodded slowly. It was a reasonable answer. It was possibly even true. But something in her small, persistent,

impossible to silence noted that it was also very convenient. She wasn't convinced. That if he was who had cared deeply and loved - could just abandon her.

He had left with that maddening gentleness of someone who believed their absence was a kindness. He never once stopped to ask whether she might have preferred the difficulty of his presence to the impeccable tidiness of his disappearance. What frightened her most now, here, with him on the branch above her and the old warmth of his presence was that she wanted to believe him. She wanted it so completely that she did not trust herself. She had been very good at finding reasons to believe him, right up until the moment when the believing ran out and she was left standing in the quiet with nothing. All that was left was an unanswered question and a hollow feeling.

The irony was not lost on her. They were the only two creatures in all the forest who had ever truly understood each other. Who had built out of two entirely different languages, something that could hold the weight of everything unsayable. She had understood him more completely than anyone in his own kind ever had, and he her. And yet when the difficulty came, when the world pressed in and the cost of loving her began to show itself, he had not turned toward her. He had shut down and shut her out. He kept his fear, his exhaustion and his impossible situation entirely to himself, as if she were someone to be protected from his life rather than the one person who had ever been given access to.

But she said none of this. Not because she did not have the words. She had been composing them for years but because she understood, looking at him now, that this was not the

moment for them. She was not ready to spend what little time they had in the place where her hurt lived. And time was what she didn't have. She knew that the swarm would be moving soon. She wanted to tell him that he made it in time to meet her, but they didn't really have a lot of time left together. She decided to not tell him any of the hurt she felt over the last three years nor that she was leaving.

She only wanted to live those moments that had chanced upon with Arion. She filed it away instead, in a place where she kept the things she was not finished with. They spoke for hours: a torrent of pent-up sorrow and unspoken love, all the things that had gathered in the long silence and now had no reason to stay quiet. But even in the warmth of their reunion, the shadow of the world lingered. The laws of their kind were still as unyielding as the old trees. Their love was still a secret - a flame that the world would not permit to burn openly.

They talked until the sky went pale. Later in the night much later she moved closer. The inch she used to close when she had something true to say. He went very still in the old, familiar way.

"I love you too," she said.

"I have for a long time. I did not say it because you were already pulling away and I did not want to be the thing that made you run."

He closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, something had shifted less like a closed door, more like a window open onto something wide.

"That is the worst part," he said. "That you were trying to protect yourself from me and you were right to."

"Yes," she said. "But here I am anyway."

He spread his wings not the small, careful inch. All the way, fully, briefly. The thing he only did when something was too large for the usual small gestures. She glowed her sustained, breathless glow the one that was everything words were trying to be.

They stayed like that until the sky began its slow argument with the dark, neither one willing to be the one who moved first. He told her again, in the plain unpolished language he'd been avoiding for longer than he could admit that he loved her. And she told him the same, in her own language, her glow holding steady and unbroken for longer than she had ever held it for anyone, something closer to a vow.

It was not new, what they felt. It had been there for longer than either of them had been willing to name it. What was new was saying it. They did not talk about what it meant, not that night. There would be time for the difficulty of it later - the parliament, the colony, the borders neither of them was supposed to cross. But for one night, in the hollow of the old oak, none of that reached them. There were only his wings around her and her light filling the dark. That night she let herself be held, in the warmth of being known. It was the first time she had felt that warmth without the undercurrent of something being wrong.

*In that timeless hush,
light and wisdom met.
Some bonds, it seems,
even time cannot unwrite.*

Whispers of a Luminous Forever

*They met in their secret grove beneath the trees,
where silence swayed with tender breeze;
but today their courage softly grew,
and led them where the half-nest drew,
closer than their guarded dreams would show,
two trembling hearts in a tender, silent glow.
In the hush of early morning light,
they touched their luminous forevers' sight,
a fleeting glow, both fierce and mild,
quiet, tender, almost wild.
Love flared bright, then fell to grace,
a gentle dance in a sacred space.
Two daring hearts in soft suspense,
drawn forward by a sweet, fierce sense,
holding back, yet leaning near,
between calm desire and fragile fear.
Wary of the fire's claim,
yet warmed and softened by its flame,
they drifted apart as dawn awoke,
carrying warmth no words had spoke.
And when they parted, none could say,
when paths would cross another day
only the ache that softly stays,
yearning through their separate ways:
an echo of a love half-seen,
still reaching where their hearts have been.*

- **Tiara**



CHAPTER THIRTEEN



"I'm leaving, Arion..." Tiara said with tears in her eyes.

She told him a few nights after they found each other again that the colony was moving. That it was time, past time. They had stayed in this meadow longer than they should have and the elders were firm: the forest to the east had been calling for two seasons now and they were going, all of them. She was part of the sparkle and could not betray them.

He was very quiet while she said all of this.

"How long?" he said.

"A couple of months. Maybe less."

He listened with his whole body rigid, his talons pressing into the soft bark. The hope that had just begun to unfurl in him seemed to wither on the vine replaced not by rage but by a cold, deep sorrow. He had wasted so much time. He had arrived, at last, only to find the shore already shifting.

Tiara, her heart aching with a love so fierce it had become a physical weight, flew to him and rested on his feathered chest. They clung to each other so tight in a world

determined to pull them apart and the reality of it pressed against them like a cold and unyielding wall.

"What will we do?" Arion said, his voice raw.

"We will love each other," Tiara answered, her light a defiant spark in the face of their despair. "We will love each other across the distance. They can take me away from you but they cannot take you out of my heart. Our love will survive. It will."

It was a desperate promise and a fragile thread of hope in a vast uncertainty. As the first light of dawn began to colour the eastern sky, they held each other, their love a secret and beautiful grief in the heart of the ancient wood.

They agreed, in those first raw days, on certain things. They would not spend what time they had left in mourning. They would not make each night a rehearsal of the last night. They would simply be there, present, together in whatever way the world was currently permitting, and they would let that be enough, because it would have to be.

They were mostly successful. There were nights, in the first week, where the weight of it settled over them and neither could find a way past it. She would catch him looking at her with attention that was too steady, too conscious, the look of someone trying to memorise rather than simply see. On those nights she would do the thing she had learned worked best with him, which was not to address it directly but to give him something else to look at. She would dance. Not the performance she gave the colony, not the choreography of the midsummer rites, but the way she moved when no one was watching, which was entirely different, less

composed and more honest. Her light doing what it wanted rather than what was required of it.

He watched her every time with the same expression. She had no name for it. It was not quite wonder, not quite grief, not quite love. It was all those things present at once, which is perhaps a different thing from any of them individually. She filed the expression away carefully. She was filing everything. There was a night in the second week that she thought about for a long time afterward.

He had been doing impressions that she had asked for of the pompous robin, then the toad, then a new one she had never seen him do before, a pitch-perfect rendering of Elder Phoss attempting to summon authority from a position of obvious exhaustion. She had not expected that one. The accuracy of it, the gentle precision with which he caught the genuine gravity and failing vitality, startled her into a laugh that was almost a sob.

He went still immediately. He watched her catch herself, watched the laugh resolve back into a laugh rather than a tear.

"Tell me something," she said, when she had steadied. "Something you have never told anyone."

He was quiet for a moment and then he said: "When I was very young, before my wingspan was fully set, I flew into a storm I had been told not to fly into. Not because I was brave. Because I wanted to know what it felt like to be inside something that large."

"What did it feel like?", she asked.

"Like being known by something that had no interest in knowing me," he said. "Like being entirely irrelevant to a force that was nevertheless entirely present with me. I found it, unexpectedly, comforting."

She looked at him. "And you have spent your whole life trying to recreate that feeling?"

He thought about it. "Yes," he said. "I suppose I have."

He did not look at her directly when he said it, which meant that he was saying something he could not quite bear to say while meeting her eyes. She did not push it. She let it sit between them, warm and unqualified, until the sky began its slow shift and they had to be other things again.

She asked him once, in the third week, about the young female owl the elders had proposed. She had heard about it. Colony news travelled in its own ways and she had more connections to the owl world than anyone in Fernwood suspected. She had held the information for weeks without asking because she was not sure she wanted the answer.

He said: "She was brought before me. She was beautiful. But I felt nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing," he said. "I excused myself and went to the old meadow. The primrose had come back."

She was quiet for a moment, sitting with the image of him alone in the clearing she had danced in, on the branch where their language had been built, looking at flowers that had no idea they were significant.

"That must have been very lonely," she said.

"Everything was lonely," he said. "For three years, everything was a version of that. Something that should have been ordinary was instead full of you, even though you weren't there."

It was, she thought, the most truthful thing he had ever said to her. More truthful, even, than *I love you*, because it was in fact love, said plainly. It named what love had felt like to live with, in the long and ordinary days.

"You should have sent a message," she said as her heart ached. Not accusatory. Simply true.

"Yes," he said. "I should have."

He did not explain why he hadn't. She did not ask. There was a time for that conversation and it was not in the middle of what little they had left.

She asked him to teach her more of the navigation stars.

She could see it in the small left tilt, the one that meant something had pleased him unexpectedly. She had catalogued that tilt so thoroughly that she could have drawn it in the dark. She wanted to be able to draw it in the dark.

"Why?" he said.

"Because then I will have something of yours that nobody can take away," she said. "Not a message, not a feather in the moss. Something I know. Something I carry in my own head."

He taught her five of them over the following nights. The one that marks the western wind. The one that tells you rain is coming in less than a day. The one that appears only in deep winter and navigates by virtue of its rarity - when you see it, you know exactly where you are. The one that tracks

the migration routes of larger birds, whose paths, if you follow them against the current of the wind, will lead you reliably to open water. And one more, which he showed her on the last clear night before the clouds came in and which he said had no function he knew of. It simply appeared in certain seasons in a position that corresponded to nothing useful and he had loved it since he was very young for exactly that reason.

"What do you call it?" she asked.

"We don't," he said. "It doesn't have a name. My father says a star that doesn't tell you something doesn't deserve one."

She looked at the star for a long time.

"I'll call it Tiara," she said.

He was very still for a long moment.

"Yes," he said finally. "That's perfect."

They made the most of the time they had. They stayed up past every reasonable hour. They talked about things they had been saving. He did every impression she asked for. She told him the story of the ancient elder's newest tale, and he listened and laughed a low, warm sound she had never quite heard from him before, full and unguarded.

She memorised the laugh. She was memorising everything. The weight of air that preceded him, the way she always knew that he was nearby before she could see him. The way he folded his wings when he was settling in for a long conversation, the small adjustment of his posture that meant - *I am here for the duration, I am not going anywhere, this is where I have decided to be.*

She memorised the temperature of the good silence between them - the kind that did not need filling that was itself a form of company.

She memorised the way he said her name. He said it rarely. They communicated mostly without names. But occasionally, when he was making a point that mattered and wanted her to know it was directed at her with full precision, he would say: *Tiara*. Just that. Her name in his voice, low and deliberate, shaped like something he had thought about before saying.

She did not tell him she was memorising things. But she was, every evening, building an archive that she intended to keep. She had learned, in the three years of his absence, that what one did not deliberately preserve was lost. She had lost some of him that way, in the three years and she was not prepared to lose any more. She watched him in those last weeks.

Arion was warm, present and generous. He never, at any point, said: *I am going to miss you and I do not have words for how much I shall miss you. I am going to sit in this oak after you are gone and the branch is going to feel like a question.*

He just laughed, listened and spread his wings. She knew it anyway. She knew his handwriting.

It was the best and worst kind of time.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN



The days of Tiara's departure arrived like a tide that had always been coming unstoppable, indifferent, entirely at odds with the smallness of the two creatures it was about to separate. The air in the clearing had changed its quality. Even the light felt thinner.

They met one last time in their clearing, the place that had seen the birth, the death and rebirth of their love. The sun was setting orange and violet layered above the tree line, too beautiful for the moment.

There were things said. Arion told her he would look for her in the moon, feel her in the warmth of the sun's last rays, and hear her in the rustle of the leaves. She told him he would be her shadow, the silent strength that held her up, the memory that kept her light from fading completely. They were beautiful things to say. She would return to them on difficult nights for a long time afterward.

But a few days before she left, she noticed. She noticed it again because she was always the one who did. He was less present not gone, not yet, but the quality of his presence had shifted. That same fractional withdrawal she had felt before.

She sat with it for two nights. Then she went to him.

"You are doing it again," she said.

He was quiet.

"I can feel it. The same way as before. You are closing. I can feel you going, even though you are sitting right here."

"I am still here," he said.

"You said that before," she said. "And then you were not."

He did not deny it. He did not say:

"I am closing down because I cannot work out how to stay open when I know you are leaving. This is the only way I know to survive it, and I know it is wrong, but I cannot seem to stop it."

She asked him to stay present. She said: "Please do not go away before I do. Please do not make these last days into a rehearsal for an absence. I am still here. Stay. "

He nodded. He said he would. He meant it.

And yet it happened. She watched it happen and felt something she did not want to name. She had told him not to disappear. She had told him how much it hurt her when he did it. His leaving had left her in pain. A million questions, unanswered. Sleepless nights, an aching heart and a pulse that felt like it was almost giving out. He had listened, agreed and then did it anyway.

She did not know whether that meant he could not help it, or whether it meant that she was not quite enough to make him try harder. That was the cruellest thought. She tried not to have it. But she had it anyway.

Ask for a Vow in the Dark

*I made you mine long before you knew,
not with vows or promises true,
but with mind and body and soul that sway
towards your pull in a silent, fated way.*

*Even if you never feel what I feel inside,
even if your heart runs wild and wide,
my love still rises, as dawn's first light,
refusing to fade with the falling night.*

*Our luminous forever's are mine to keep,
sacred moments carved quiet and deep.
I need no distance, no change from you
choose what you must, do what you do.*

*And though I am last where your choices live,
I stand true with all I can give.
I do not know how this love began,
fate whispered your name into my span.*

*It carved you deep in a place so near,
even before I had learned to hear.
You are my first thought and my last,
my trembling middle, my aching past.*

*You stand upon my heart's own shelf,
where live only family and forever-self.
If you want this flame, beyond the skies,
then make me yours, let truth meet my eyes.*

*Ask in the hush, in twilight's hue,
where only you catch my whisper - I do.
A nuptial vow the stars endowed,
not of this world, but souls unbowed.*

- Tiara

All she received was silence and no answer to her question.
All it left her with were more questions.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN



He did not come back. Not the following week, when she waited. Not the week after that. Not when the leaves turned gold and the colony began preparing for the seasonal migration to the eastern valleys. Not when she delayed her migration by three days, staying behind hoping Arion would come by.

She sent messages. She used every channel she could find. She sent the spiral. She sent the simple signal that meant - I am here. I am here. I am here.

The wind brought nothing back.

Arion stood in the hollow of the parliament tree, surrounded by his kins. He excused himself and flew to the old meadow. He sat on their bench and closed his eyes.

He tried to remember why he had stopped going to her. This was harder than he expected. He told himself again that it was the elders. The watchers. The impossible distance. These were not lies, exactly. But in the quiet of the meadow, he could hear beneath all his explanations the simpler and more terrible truth: he was tired. He was tired of the ache. He had chosen, slowly and without quite deciding - the life that did not cost him everything.

He told himself Tiara would understand. He told himself he would reach out soon. But he never did.

Tiara felt the change before she understood it. At first, she filled the silences with excuses on his behalf like she always did. He was being watched. The distance was unreliable. There were reasons. There were always reasons and she was generous enough or desperate enough to supply them for him.

Underneath the generosity, she was fading. The brightness that had once defined her was being replaced by something quieter: a persistent, low-grade sorrow that she had stopped trying to shake.

She left on a morning of early winter. The swarm gathered at dawn. She was there on time. She did not look back at the oak as they moved east. That is not entirely true. She looked once. He was not on the branch. She turned east and kept going.

In the weeks that followed, she waited. She watched for feathers. She listened for low, vowel-shaped sounds carried on the wind from the west.

Nothing came.

Tiara had not known, before this, that waiting could turn into something else. It did not feel like forgetting. It did not feel like giving up, exactly. It felt like a decision made somewhere in her, in the small hollow bones that carried her through the air each night. She could not build a life around this. Not around the crossing of the garden, not around the empty branch, not around a question that never quite closed. The anticipation had grown heavier than the loss itself. And she understood, finally, that living without

an answer was worse than simply deciding there wasn't going to be one. She reached that point on a night, sitting on a strange tree, watching the sky move through all its colours, feeling the shape of him missing as she had felt it for months now.

One night, alone on the highest branch in her new forest, she admitted the truth that had been waiting for her. She was waiting for someone who had stopped reaching for her. That she loved someone, who had learned to live without her. She was hoping for a message that was never going to come.

She still loved Arion. And that she probably always would love him. But she also understood something else. She had never been certain whether he loved her back. Or if he loved her enough. His disappearing every time things got hard didn't help answer that with any certainty. He charmed his way back in and each time she let him and each time the question stayed exactly as unanswered as before.

And she thought: *I must stop waiting.*

Not because she had stopped loving him. She had not stopped loving him. But because she had waited long enough and she owed herself more than an open question she could not close.

"You love me. I believe that. I think you always will, in whatever quiet internal way you manage love. And I love you - that is not the question. The question is whether love is enough when the one you love cannot stay. When they close every time, the cost becomes real. When the promise and the disappearance keep arriving together. I am not unimportant. I know that, even on the nights it feels

otherwise. I know that my light is not nothing. I know that I deserved more than a door shut quietly in my face twice by someone who loved me. Knowing that does not make it hurt less. But I know it."

She spent three nights composing her final letter to Arion. It was not angry. She had expected anger and had even welcomed the idea of it. Anger would have been more useful than what she felt, which was a grief so thorough it had become a kind of peace.

She sat to compose her final letter to him:

"I have loved you with everything I am. I have waited for you in ways I did not know I was capable of waiting.

I have sent my light into the darkness, again and again, because I did not want to stop believing you were watching. But I cannot keep reaching for someone who has stopped reaching back. I am not asking you to choose me. I am not asking you to leave your world or fight your elders or give up the life that is waiting for you.

I am only asking you, now, to tell me the truth: Did you ever truly love me? Or was I simply a beautiful thing that happened to you once, at a time when you were lonely enough to let it?

If you loved me truly the way I mean when I use that word, then find me. Send me a sign. One spiral, carved into any bark, carried by any wind.

But if you cannot - if the distance has become your answer, then let me go.

Let me go completely, Arion.

I cannot be invisible anymore. I cannot be someone you visit only when you have room for it. I deserve to be a priority. And if I cannot be yours, then I must learn, at last, to be my own.

– Yours forever Tiara”

She sent the letter. And this time she did not wait.

Just as she had known, the wind returned nothing.

Before I Cease to Be

*I see the signs, I feel them too,
the quiet tremor breaking through.
Your heart grows fonder, I sense its beat,
yet I know not the words to speak,
nor how to find, nor how to seek
the road to so near, yet bleak.
I reach in silence, lost, unsure,
my voice unformed, my heart still pure.
If some faint bond hears my quiet plea,
then find me before I cease to be.
For my end is coming soon.*

- Tiara



CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Tiara left her new valley on a night when the moon was behind clouds. She did not announce it. She rose from her resting place just before midnight and flew not west, not east, but in a direction, she had never flown before, into the wide, unclaimed dark beyond the edge of the known forest.

She was not running away from Arion. She knew she could not run from something that had already become part of her. She would carry him. She would always carry the memory of his wing spread above her in the rain, the coded messages in the moss, the way his voice had sounded when he said: *You are my star.*

These things were hers now. They had been woven into her and they would remain. But she chose not to be defined by them. She chose to be, finally, something other than the firefly who waited. She flew through the darkness, her glow soft and steady and she thought of all the things she had survived. The condemnation of her elders. The long months of confinement. The three years of silence and the fragile, beautiful weeks that had followed and then the silence after that. She had survived all of it. Damaged but intact. Still herself. Still glowing.

Somewhere far behind her, in a forest she would not see again, the night was quiet. She did not look back. She left because she wanted to belong to herself before she belonged to any swarm, bound by nothing, defined by only her own light.

The first night she flew without direction.

This was new for her. She had spent her entire life oriented toward the colony, toward the meadow, toward the oak, toward the west where his light was not visible, but where she sent hers anyway. Even in Fernwood, even in the long months of deliberate forgetting, she had been facing something. Now she was facing nothing and she discovered slowly that it was not as frightening as she had imagined it would be.

She flew until the sky began to fade. Then she found a stand of silver birch she did not recognise - pale-barked, many-trunked, the kind of trees that grow in clusters as if for company and she tucked herself into a crook of bark and let her light go to its lowest, most private pulse and she slept.

She found water on the second day. A creek she had no name for, running quick and cold over pale stones. A heron stood motionless in the shallows downstream, watching the water for movement with the patience of a creature that has never once doubted its purpose. She watched it for a long time.

She had always admired patience in other creatures without entirely trusting it in herself. She was quick to feel, quick to understand, quick to commit to things that required a slower deliberation. It had served her well in some respects

and cost her in others. She thought about the three years she had spent sending her light westward with a patience that was. She now understood, it was not really patience at all. It was hope, wearing patience's clothes. Real patience, she suspected, looked more like the heron - present without expectation, available without agenda. She was not sure she had ever managed that.

She was not sure she wanted to. She had seen what the absence of expectation cost Arion, in the end. He had been patient not to want. She did not want to become that. She wanted to want things. That was different from wanting things recklessly. She was learning, in these first solitary days, to feel the difference.

On the third night she encountered a moth.

He was old, as moths go, his wings frayed and their patterns worn soft. He rested on an oak's bark, in a part of the forest so quiet the silence felt like its own presence. She landed near him, at a polite distance. She had no reason to stop except that she was tired. She found the large old tree very comforting.

"You glow differently from the usual," the moth said, without turning to look at her. His voice was of something very old - not frail but settled.

"I know," she said.

"Warmer," he said. "Most fireflies this far out pulse cold. Something about the forest. Less light gets through. After a few generations they compensate." He considered for a moment. "Yours hasn't compensated."

"I haven't been here long enough," she said.

"Or you're stubborn," he said. Not unkindly.

She thought about this. "Probably both."

He finally turned to look at her, his compound eyes catching the small gold of her glow and returning it in fragments - a thousand tiny Tiaras, all looking slightly different, all present simultaneously. She found this, unexpectedly, comforting rather than unsettling. All the versions of herself, visible at once. None of them cancelled the others out.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I don't know yet," she said. And then, because honesty had been the one thing she had never quite been able to give up even when it cost her: "I have been going towards something or away from something my entire life. This time I am trying to find out what it feels like to just go."

The moth was quiet for a moment. Then: "It feels like this," he said. "Exactly like this. You get used to it. And then, eventually, it stops feeling like anything and starts feeling like yourself."

She sat with that for a long time. "How long?" she asked.

"Different for everyone," he said. "But if you're asking the question, it means you're already more than halfway there."

"Is that why you're still here?" she asked. "In the dark? Alone?"

The moth almost smiled. "I am not in the dark," he said. "I am made of what the dark could not put out. That is not the same as being alone. That is not the same as being unloved. It is simply what is left after you have stopped waiting for someone else to turn on the light."

"Some things need both a wing and a wick," he said. "You are lucky. You were born with both."

She did not know if this was true. She suspected the old moth was wiser in some respects and simpler in others than he appeared to be. But she held the words anyway - learning to hold herself: as something already whole. She had wings enough to fly without being carried. She had a glow that had never once needed Arion's permission to shine. She did not need him to be her wing or his fire to be her wick. She had always been both.

She let the words sit there, allowing for the possibility that they might be more useful than they seemed.

In the second week she stopped measuring time by Arion.

It happened gradually, without announcement. One morning she woke in a stand of pines and her first thought was not his face but the colour of the light through the needles, a fractured gold-green that she had no word for but wanted one. She lay there for a full minute simply looking at it before she noticed that something was different.

Then she noticed. She woke with the clarity of someone who had slept without dread for the first time in longer than they can account for. Not happiness - it was too early and she was too honest with herself to call it that. But something structural had shifted. The shape of the absence was different. For the first time in a very long time, the missing was not organised around a direction. She was not missing him toward the west. She was simply missing him. That was a different thing. She did not yet know whether it was better or worse. She suspected it was both, in different proportions on different days.

She had not stopped loving him. She was learning to carry it differently. Not at the centre, where it had been for so long that she had organised her entire interior around it.

She was learning to be her own fixed point. It was harder than she had expected but also simpler. Harder because she had spent so long looking outward at him, at the west, at the space where a message might arrive. Harder because looking inward required muscles she had underused. Simpler because it turned out the interior self that she had been protecting all these years, was more intact than she had feared. It had survived. The things she had experienced had changed it, but it was still, underneath all of it, recognisably her.

She was still the firefly who had stood in the cold blue circle of the elders and refused to say *I accept*. She was still the creature who had named an unnamed star after herself and meant it not as arrogance but as the simplest possible truth: *"I am here, I am real, I will not be made nameless by someone else's accounting of what deserves to be seen."*

She was still the one who had taught herself to carry warmth for no one, through the long empty months in Fernwood and had discovered that warmth carried for its own sake did not diminish. That generosity without recipient was still generosity, that light offered into the dark without any assurance of being seen was still light. She held this understanding carefully.

On a clear night in the third week, she stopped in a meadow. It was smaller, more ragged at its edges, the grass a different texture, the creek that bordered it wider and slower and smelling of different stones. But there was a patch of open sky above it and the stars were clearer than

she had seen them in months. The cloud cover that had followed her from the eastern forest finally thinned to nothing.

She rose to the highest point she could reach and she looked for the navigation stars. The one that marked the western wind. The one that told you rain was coming. The one that appeared only in deep winter, navigating by rarity. The migration star that led to open water.

She found them all. One by one, exactly where he had taught her, they would be, holding their positions with absolute reliability.

And then she looked for the unnamed one. The star with no function. The one she had named for herself. It was there. Small, fixed, present without purpose, navigating nothing. She looked at it for a long time.

She thought *I am still here*. Not as a message to him, not as the signal she had sent westward every night for three years. As a simple private fact, addressed to only herself. Present without purpose. Still glowing. Still exactly where she had always been if anyone cared to learn to look.

She let her light glow to its fullest then. Not performance. Not signal. Just her light, warm and gold, offered freely into the dark with no expectation of getting anything in return.. .

Somewhere far to the west, she suspected, a parliament of owls was convening in a hollow of great hornbeam. Somewhere to the west, a creature she would always love was sitting in the silence of a world that had always wanted more of him than he could give. She hoped that he was alright. She was alright. The fact that these two facts could coexist surprised her a little.

She dimmed her light to travelling pace and flew on into the dark not looking back.

Arion found her message days after she had sent it. The old magpie, nearly blind and slower than she had ever been, had made the journey out of a sense of obligation. She collapsed at the base of the parliament tree at dawn, clutching a piece of bark etched with spirals of light.

Arion read it under the cold light of the moon. He read it once quickly and then sat very still for a long time and then he read it again.

He was looking for the part that would let him argue. He did not find it. Because she had not been angry. She had only, quietly and precisely, with the devastating accuracy of someone who has taken a very long time to find her words, told the truth.

I cannot be invisible anymore.

He sat with this for hours. He had not stopped loving her. That was not the problem. The problem was that he had let love become a thing he kept rather than a thing he tended. He had treated her like a fire he could return to when he was cold, rather than a fire that needed feeding.

He flew that night. He flew east with everything he had, harder than he had flown in years, through weather that should have grounded him. He flew with the urgency of someone who had understood, finally, what he stood to lose. It took him days to get to her colony at last.

The fireflies there told him of Tiara who had glowed like old gold, who had danced with great joy once, who had spent her nights looking westward for a long time, who had

finally stopped looking and had gone, one moonless night, alone. But they did not know where she was.

He searched the area for days, calling for her in the old codes, carving spirals into every tree he could find. Nothing answered. She was already gone.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



He searched for a long time. He flew to every part of the forest he had ever known and many he had not. He crossed rivers he had no name for and asked every creature he could find whether they had seen a firefly who glowed like old gold.

Some had seen lights they could not explain. A steady glow in a nameless part of the wood. A spiral traced in bioluminescence on the bark of a tree no one had mapped. He followed every thread. None of them led to her.

Weeks became months. He grew leaner, older. His feathers, always the colour of twilight, began to grey at their edges. He sent messages on every wind. He left spirals carved into trees in every direction, hoping that if she found them, she would understand: *"I am still looking. I am still here."*

He did not know if she ever found them.

Sometimes, on clear nights, he would see a flicker of gold in the far distance a light that moved differently from the others, a pulse with a familiar rhythm. He flew toward it every time, with a hope because it was all there was left to do. It was never her.

But there came a night, near the end of that long search, when the flicker did not behave the way all the others had. It did not scatter and held its rhythm - the old spiral, the one that had only ever meant one thing between them. He followed it until the trees turned unfamiliar, until a colony he did not recognise rose out of the dark around him and something in his chest, some old compass he had never fully lost, told him: *Get closer*.

Just before dawn, while the colony still slept, she heard it.

Not a sound. A presence. The weight of air suddenly felt very still and very close.

She looked up. He was on the branch above her.

Not the branch of her exile, not the branch of her new colony's unfamiliar trees. He had crossed all distance, all of it and he was there. His feathers were ruffled from travel, his amber eyes shadowed by something she had not seen in them before. Not the cold withdrawal she had learned to dread. Not the careful, measured distance of an owl managing himself. Something rawer than that. Something undone.

He did not speak for a long time.

She did not speak either. She had learned, over years of silences and all the long patient waiting, that rushing him into speech before he was ready only pushed him further back. So, she waited while holding her glow soft and steady.

When he finally spoke, his voice was lower than she had ever heard. A voice that had been carried a long distance and set down with great care.

"I have done a terrible thing to you," he said. "Not by loving you - I would not take that back. But by loving you without the courage to show you that I did. By giving you my heart in fragments, in pieces and coded messages in the dark and then disappearing when you needed me to simply stay."

Tiara's light trembled.

"I told myself it was the parliament. The elders. The laws. The impossible distance between what I am and what you are. And those things are real I do not want to lie to you about that. They are real and immovable and also the reason I cannot give you the life you deserve. Not in this world. Not in this form. Not while the laws of my kind and yours run as deep as the roots of these trees."

He paused.

"But I used those things as shields. I let the real answer, which was simply that I was afraid; afraid of what it cost to love something I could not keep. And so, it stayed hidden beneath all the reasonable explanations. And in doing so I made you carry a question that was never yours to carry."

He looked at her directly then. Amber eyes open. No distance.

"So here is the truth, Tiara. The whole of it. Not a fragment. Not a code. The whole truth I should have given you the night I said I love you and then disappeared."

"I love you. I have loved you from the night I first saw you dancing. Not as a beautiful curiosity. Not as a flicker in the dark. As the most real thing I have ever encountered - the one thing that made the world feel like it was the right size.

You made me braver than I knew how to be and kinder than I was raised to expect of myself. You are the first thought I have had every morning for years and the last thought before I sleep. And I have been failing to say this out loud."

She was glowing full and uncontrolled. The light she had kept rationed and careful for so long was now flooding from her like a window thrown open.

"But I cannot give you a place in my world." His voice did not break. He said it with the gravity of someone who has sat with a hard truth long enough to carry it cleanly. "The parliament will never accept it. My kind will never bless it. What I can offer you is a life made smaller by the shape of my duty and the constant weight of a love lived in secret. It will be like the cruelty of watching someone you love to be not-quite-enough of a priority in the world that other creatures can see. You deserve better than that. You deserve a love that can be seen."

The silence between them was enormous, clear and containing everything.

"So, I cannot be yours in the way that you need," Arion said. "Not in this life. Not in this arrangement of the world."

He spread his wings fully open; the one he had learned was his most unguarded gesture.

"But I want to say this to you plainly, before whatever time we have runs out. In another life in some other arrangement of the universe, when I am not bound by hollow or the parliament and the laws of my kind, I will be yours. Only yours. Completely and without apology. And in a way the whole world can see. I will find you in every life until I find

you in a life where I can keep you. That is the only promise I can make that I am certain I will keep."

Tiara was quiet for a long time.

She had rehearsed this moment or something like it so many times in her imagination that she had been afraid the reality of it would be smaller than the rehearsal. It was not smaller. It was larger. It was the thing she had been waiting to know, delivered with more honesty than she had hoped for.

She moved closer. The inch she always closed when she had something true to say.

"I know," she said quietly. "I have known, I think, for a long time that it was real. That the silences were fear and not absence of feeling. I just needed you to tell me. I needed you to take the question back from me, because I have been carrying it alone for years. The anticipation and the ache have been very heavy."

There was a second truth sitting beside the relief, one she needed a breath before speaking. Somewhere in three years of silence, without quite meaning to, she had stopped waiting for him - though she had never once stopped loving him. She had stopped needing him to come back to know her own worth. She had built that herself, alone, out of nights with no answer and a light that kept burning anyway. What he had just given her was not the foundation. It was only, finally, the truth laid over one she had already built without him.

"What we had was real," Tiara said. "What we have, right now, standing here - that's real too. I don't need it to be more than this to know it mattered. I don't need you to fix it

or promise me some other life, for this one to have counted." Her light did not dim as she said it. "I just needed to hear it from you. Not because I couldn't have gone on without knowing - I could have. I would have. But because you deserved to be the one who finally said it and I deserved to finally hear it."

Arion knew he had disappointed her again. He knew exactly what his silence had cost her, and he was standing under the weight of it.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



She was not angry. She never had been, not really. Grief had done that work instead, wearing itself down over three years into something closer to peace. What she felt now was simple: she loved him, and she did not need anything from him to make that love true.

They stayed through the night. Not talking, mostly there. There had been enough words, and the ones that mattered had been said. They stayed in the old way: her light casting warm rings across his feathers, his stillness a shelter around her, the dark forest doing the thing it had always done and holding them in its patient embrace.

Near dawn, when the sky had begun to consider the idea of morning, Arion spoke again. "I want to make you a promise. Not the kind that asks you to wait."

She turned to look at him.

"I want to promise you that I will love you in all the ways available to me. Across every distance. Through every silence. Even in the times I cannot send you messages, even in the stretches when the parliament watches too closely, even when the winds will not carry our codes and even when the world conspires to keep us separate - I will be

loving you. You will not always be able to see it. But it will be constant. It will not dim."

She pulsed her light. Three quick flashes. The old code: *I missed you.*

He tilted his head the small left tilt, the one she had catalogued - that meant what she said pleased him in a way that he was not prepared for.

"I will love you in all the ways available to me. Not as waiting. Not as longing. As a fact the way the light in me is a fact, not performance, not effort, just what I am. You will always be part of what I am." she said.

"In another life," he said, "you will be mine and I will be yours and we will not have to be a secret. We will be a whole thing, visible in the light."

"In another life," she sighed.

"I will find you," he said.

It was not a fairytale ending. It was not a resolution. But it was the entire truth of them. And in that predawn dark, in the forest with the primrose petals catching what little light there was, it was enough. It was, perhaps, more than enough. It was everything.

The forest, ancient and attentive, had always known things that its inhabitants did not. It had held the story from the beginning from the first night the owl stayed on his branch and watched the firefly dance, through all the silences and misunderstandings and the slow, costly education in what love requires.

It had been patient. It had waited. Now it made itself known.

The primrose at the meadow's edge back in Serenwood, the one that had been their meeting place, the one Tiara had danced beneath the night they first spoke - *bloomed out of season*. Not once.

Every time one of them said the other's name -

Rain arrived beneath cloudless skies.

The stars leaned closer and lingered a little longer.

The moon shone brighter than nights before.

Wildflowers grew where no seeds had been sown.

Fireflies not yet old enough to glow flickered for the very first time.

Owls, who never sang, found themselves lingering in quiet harmony with the wind.

Even the ancient creek slowed its hurried journey to the sea, as though pausing to listen whenever their voices filled the night.

And always, beneath the old primrose, another blossom unfurled - small, peculiar and touched with the unmistakable gold of Tiara's light. The colour of her light.



A Love the Moon Kept Secret

*In the hush between heartbeat and nightfall,
where the forest holds its breath,
an owl with dusk in his feathers
met a firefly carrying dawn in her chest.*

*They were not meant to cross paths
he belonged to the solemn constellations,
she to the drifting lanterns of summer grass.
Yet his eyes followed her glowing laughter,
and her light lingered on the curve of his shadow.*

*Their love had no vow, no name,
no place in the books of earthly things.
Some said it was forbidden.
Others said it was impossible.*

*But they never asked the moon,
who saw how he softened his wings.
just to keep from disturbing her flight,
how she dimmed her glow
so he could rest in the comfort of her light.*

*They drew closer as if guided by ancient memory,
a dance of silence and shimmer.
He the guardian of secrets,
she the keeper of small brightness.*

*And though their worlds were stitched
from different threads of time,
something ancient echoed
when they met in the sky's deep blue:
a truth beyond reason,
a forever that needed no promise.*

*Perhaps in this life
they were only meant to brush souls
a moment, a miracle,
a whisper on the edge of dreams.*

*In another lifetime,
when the universe stirs its magic again,
he will be the lantern she follows,
and she the haven where he returns.*

*Until then, they remain:
night and spark,
shadow and star,
wing and wick,
two beings who loved
with no claim, no chain, no boundary
only the pure, impossible certainty
that they had once found
something true in each other's light.*



EPILOGUE



Arion kept his vigil in the great hollow oak and Tiara built her world in the forest across the eastern ridge and between them the world continued its slow, faithful work of carrying their love in the ways it had found available to itself. The rain. The rainbows. The stars that brightened when a name was spoken. The wind that moved with intention through feathers and wings.

They did not see each other often. The distance, the laws and the shape of their separate lives made that almost impossible. But the distance between them was no longer lonely. The same miles. The same silence, still loving across a distance that hadn't changed. The love between them had become part of the landscape itself, written into the forest.

Arion settled where the trees had forgotten they were once saplings. It was a place of deep silence, measuring time in centuries through shadow and stone. His kind had lived there since before the forest had a name: watchful, still, and sovereign in the dark.

Tiara moved to the luminous colonies, where summer never quite surrendered, where the warm nights were thick with

light, the air tasted of flower-pollen and salt. It was a world of brief, brilliant things, that measured time in heartbeats.

Different worlds.

Different skies.

Different ways of being alive.

And yet on nights when the ancient forest held its breath - the last gold of a summer evening thinned into true twilight and the stars leaned down. In that twilight moment, they shared the same sky. Just briefly. Just once.

He on his high branch, patient and eternal, wings folded against the dark.

She in the open air below, her light pulsing warm and gold luminous and impossibly beautiful.

In that moment that they found each other, something happened that neither world had language for. His stillness held her glow. Her glow softened his dark.

He became, in her brightness, something more than watchful.

She became, in his shelter, something more than brief.

The ancient and the fleeting looked at each other and for one suspended, luminous moment, neither was alone.

And then, as it always did, the night began to end. He felt her light dim towards departure. She felt the dark begin to loosen around her and something in them ached. Neither lingered nor did they promise to return sooner or stay longer or ask the sky for more than it had already given. They simply let go gently, deliberately not because it didn't

hurt, but because it did and they chose it anyway. This is what the forest remembered, long after:

The owl and the firefly.

Wing and Wick –

Born in the space between the owl's patient stillness and the firefly's brave, illuminating glow.

Between the forest floor and the open sky.

Between holding on and letting go.

Their name carried into the world the courage to glow in the dark and the grace to shelter what glows.

Two flames. One light.

They did not become the same.

The magic was that they remained entirely themselves - wing and wick,

shadow and spark,

the eternal and the ephemeral and

in remaining themselves, they made something that neither could have made alone.

Light. Real light. The kind that warms rather than merely illuminates.





*For every love that burned too bright for the world to hold.
For every heart that was never quite certain it was loved in
return.*

*And for every moment when two different lights met
and made something brighter than either could alone.*



The End

