

THE CROSS-STITCH BIRD

By Leia French

A caged bird wished upon a shooting star.

She wished for freedom. To be human.

The star would grant her wish, but at a price: She may not fall in love.

If she did, she would write the name of her beloved on a maple leaf.

She would send it out upon the winds, abandoning her love to the stars.

For admitting that love would mean death.



Sunset. Checked tiles. Black and white.

That's what Tiel saw, gaze flickering between the cracks.

Perched upon those cracks was a wooden chair. And perched upon that chair, legs asway, was a girl who probably saw something quite different. Probably shadow and light, ravens and doves, violets and lilies.

She probably found poetry in a kitchen floor the way Tiel found a girl in her wrinkled eyes.

Eyes, he reminded himself, that carried eighty years of seeing things he couldn't.

Speaking of.

"Ahem."

Nary didn't look up. If anything, in fact, she buried her head further into...what *was* she doing?

"AHM." Maybe he was saying it wrong? "Ah...hem. Ahem? Ahhhheeeeeee"-

"Oh, oh what is it?"

"I need help."

"No, not you! You hush," she said, flapping her hands.

“But”-

“Something’s wrong!”

“Oh...Maybe you didn’t say hello?”

“No, no, it’s my cross-stitch! Something’s missing.”

“But I was right! You did forget to say hello.”

“Yes, you’re right, hello, now hush.”

Tiel frowned. He wandered closer, stepping carefully – and lamenting the loss of the walking stick he’d left in their lounge.

He snuck up to her ears. She didn’t seem to mind. Or she hadn’t noticed.

Hmm.

“Hello,” he whispered.

“Tiel!” Nary whacked his head with the cross-stitch. “What did I just say?”

“Hello?”

“No, I told you to hush!”

“But I had to say hello back.”

“Goody, you’ve said it, now huuu-*uush!*”

“But I can’t hush.”

“Why?!”

“I need help.”

Nary groaned like her intestines were doing the can-can.

“Fiiiiine,” she sighed. “What could you *possibly* need on this *lovely* afternoon?”

“I’m feeling something.”

“What kind of something?”

“I don’t know, that’s why I’m asking.”

“Not again, Tiel!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry to *me*!”

“I’m sorry.”

Nary sighed and turned back to her cross-stitch.

“Well...I don’t know, just...take a walk! Take some pills, go make love to a tree. Or, oh! Why don’t you write that story you’ve been meaning to, hm?”

“Why?”

“Well, you’ll leave me in peace for one thing.”

“But I don’t want to write a story.”

“Why?”

“I’d rather hear yours.”

‘Taken aback’ was a strange look on Nary. So was ‘sad’...

“Hmph,” she grumbled.

Ah. Must’ve imagined it.

“Well, Tiel” she huffed, “I’m writing a story right now.”

“But you’re stitching.”

“It’s a cross-stitch story.”

“Can I hear it?”

“You can see it when it’s done.”

“But you could just”-

“And if you left me in bloody peace, you could see it faster.”

“But”-

“TIEL!”

Tiel stumbled back.

Nary’s eyes widened.

“...Sorry,” she mumbled.

She turned away, running a thumb under grey lashes.

“Nary...are you”-

“Just...shut up, Tiel,” she sniffed.

“Nar”-

“Just let me do this for you. Alright?”

She picked up the cross-stitch, swiping the last stray drops from her eyes.

“For...me?”

“Yes, for you, you little shit.”

“But it’s making you sad.”

“Some things are worth being sad for.”

“But you could do something else.”

“Tiel...”

“You could tell me what I’m feeling.”

“*Tiel*”-

“You always like telling me what I’m feeling.”

Nary inhaled like she’d been slapped. For the first time that day, she looked him in the eyes.

Her hands were shaking.

“That’s a horrible thing to say, Tiel,” she said quietly.

“It...is? Wait, it is?”

“What kind of friend does that make me?”

“But”-

“Get out.”

“Show me.”

“Get *out*.”

“Show me!”

Tiel lunged forward and ripped the cross stitch from her hands. His eyes chased the pattern and...and...

“Pfft.”

Nary, breathing hard, glared as his shoulders started shaking with laughter.

“...*What?*” she hissed.

“Nary...what kind of story *is* this?”

“I,” she blinked, “I *beg* your”-

“It looks,” Tiel giggled, “I mean, that’s clearly a pe”-

“It’s a shooting star!”

“But, but that bird,” Tiel wheezed, “That bird looks like it’s smoking!”

“It’s holding a pen!”

“And, and the thing it’s smoking at”-

“Writing on!”

“Yes, sorry, writing on – it looks like,” Tiel paused, clutching his gut, “It looks like a pile of shi”-

“That’s a maple leaf!”

“A maple leaf? A...”

Tiel paused. Swallowed.

“Wait...Nary. This is”-

“Oh,” Nary whispered. “I see. That’s what’s missing.”

Tiel could only watch, shaking, as Nary took the cross-stitch from his hands.

“There were two birds, weren’t there?” she said.

“Nary...”

“Two little birds, turned human,” she said. *Stitch*. “Two little birds, who didn’t know *how* to be human.”

“I”-

“So one little bird buried herself in art.” *Stitch*. “And the other little bird buried himself in her.” *Stitch*.

“Nar”-

“And you know what the worst part is?” *Stitch*.

“I”-

“She liked it.” *Stitch*.

“...What?”

“She liked every fucking part. She liked being the centre of his universe.” *Stitch*. “She liked that he depended on her.” *Stitch*. “For everything.” *Stitch*.

“But”-

“She liked that he couldn’t leave.” *Stitch*.

“I...”

“Because everyone else did.” *Stitch*.

Nary turned the cloth to face him, and there was something new now. A white blob, with a yellow blob on top, and a black blob for the eye.

A cockatiel.

“You happy?” she whispered.

“Nary...”

“You got your story. Are you happy, now?”

“No, Nary, I’m not happy at all, I”-

“Well good. Because it’s not finished.”

“Wh-what?”

“I still have to sew the name.”

Tiel’s eyes widened.

“Th-the name?”

“The name. A cross-stitch name in a cross-stitch leaf.”

“But...but it’s not going to a cross-stitch star.”

“No.”

“But...but then”-

“Yes.”

“N-no...”

“It’s going to you.”

An admittance of love.

Tiel wanted to rush forward and rip it from her hands again, but Nary had already started sewing. If he saw even the tiniest hint of a name-

He squeezed his eyes shut.

“I won’t look,” he said.

“You will,” she said.

“Why?” Tiel sobbed.

“You have to.”

“I don’t!”

“You do.”

Tiel covered his eyes with his hands as though that would help.

“I wish I hadn’t asked,” he whispered. “I wouldn’t have even understood it.”

“Ha. Should’ve written a letter, hm?”

“I wouldn’t want a letter.”

“I could’ve just told you.”

“I wouldn’t want that either.”

“Neither would I.”

“...Huh?”

Tiel heard the needle come out.

He didn’t hear it go back in.

“I wanted to waste time, I think” she said. “I think I wanted all the time I could get with you.”

Tiel felt a tap on his shoulder. He shook his head.

“You can look now,” Nary whispered.

“No,” Tiel said. “I won’t.”

“I want to go out on my terms, Tiel. With you knowing.”

“No...”

That means you have to look.”

“No.”

“Open your eyes.”

“NO!”

“TIEL!”

“I WON’T!”

“TIEL, PLEASE!” Nary cried. Tiel felt the arm on his shoulder shake. “I...I need you.”

Tiel stopped.

Nary’s hand ran down his shoulder, fingers slipping into his.

He took a deep, shuddering breath.

“You stupid Canary,” he whispered.

“My lovely Cockatiel,” she sighed.

Tiel clutched her fingers tighter.

“Nary?” he said quietly.

“Yes?”

“...I won’t forget you.”

“Please,” Nary laughed. “Please do.”

She squeezed his hand...and Tiel opened his eyes.

Nary wasn’t there anymore.

Just a small puff of feathers.

A cross stitch circle with his name in the centre.

And the sudden realisation, as the checked tiles grew damper, that the 'something' was loneliness.