



## Bartholomew and the Shape of the Void

By Yogesh



The hollow in the old oak was less a home than a hollowed-out fear. For Bartholomew, the setting of the sun was an amputation, the loss of a sense he clung to. The world outside dissolved into a black, suffocating velvet, a void that threatened to swallow the memory of light. He would draw his wings around himself, a futile shield against the vast, silent emptiness he felt both outside and in.





One evening, a familiar, rhythmic glow appeared at the edge of his hollow. It was Lux, a quiet companion whose light asked for nothing. He didn't offer words or platitudes, for he knew that some darknesses cannot be reasoned with. He simply was; a single, unwavering point of light in the overwhelming dark.



A soundless weight settled on a branch above. It was Strix, the old owl, whose silence was heavier than any words. His eyes, like amber pools, held the reflection of a thousand starless nights. "You tremble at the dark," Strix's voice rasped, a sound like dry leaves skittering over stone. "You think it is an absence, a nothing. It is not. It is a presence. It is its own truth."





"You curse the dark for what your eyes cannot do," Strix continued, his gaze unwavering. "It is a fool's errand. You are trying to read a book in a language you do not know. The world is not only what is seen, little one. You must learn a new tongue." Bartholomew shivered, the owl's words peeling back a layer of his fear to reveal the ignorance beneath.



As if in agreement, Lux pulsed his light, a slow, steady beat in the quiet air. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. A rhythm to anchor the soul. It was a silent urging, a reminder that other senses, other heartbeats, existed in the world. It was time to try.





Bartholomew inhaled the scent of damp earth and decay, and from his throat, he tore a sharp, desperate cry. It was not a call, but a question thrown into the abyss. And the abyss answered. A ghost of a feeling, a phantom touch against his mind, returned to him, painting the shape of the tree before him not in light, but in pure, unadulterated knowledge.



He tried again, a clearer, more deliberate pulse of sound. The echo returned more swiftly, more defined. It spoke to him of the rough bark to his left, the smooth curve of the hollow above, the soft moss beneath his claws. He was not seeing. He was understanding.





With a tremor that was not entirely fear, Bartholomew unfurled his wings. He crawled to the precipice of his home, the great, silent ocean of night air waiting. He could feel Strix's steady presence above, a silent witness to his test. The fear was still a cold stone in his gut, but now he held a key.



He fell into the void, and for a terrifying second, he was lost. Then he called out, and the world answered. The echo defined the stoic, unyielding presence of a nearby boulder and the gentle, fluttering passage of a moth. Lux flew beside him, a small, familiar star in the vast, newly-mapped cosmos.





The night was not beautiful or magical. It simply was. And he was a part of it. He flew with a newfound purpose, his calls weaving a tapestry of perception around him. He no longer needed to banish the darkness, for he had learned its language. The void had a shape, and his inner light was not a candle against the storm, but the compass that allowed him to navigate it.