

THE LANTERN THAT FORGOT ITS FLAME

\$LANTN

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FADE IN.

INT. ELARA'S COTTAGE - NIGHT

Rain taps the copper lantern frames hanging from the rafters. ELARA (11) sits on a wooden stool, knees drawn up, staring at the black lantern in her lap. Its glass is cold, no flame inside. Her mother, LIRA (late 30s), folds a sky-sail in the corner.

ELARA

I'm not scared.

LIRA

Then come sit with me until the wind changes.

Elara doesn't move. She turns the lantern over. A single drop of rainwater slides down the inside of the glass and pools at the bottom like ink.

EXT. VESPERA DOCK - NIGHT

Dozens of children hold glowing lanterns. Their lights bob and drift on the wind. Elara steps onto the dock last. Her black lantern draws stares. KAEL, a small fox-shaped shadow, watches from the roof of a nearby shed, tail flicking.

Elara sets her lantern on the water. It sinks. The other lanterns rise and sail toward the horizon. Elara watches hers disappear beneath the black surface.

INT. ELARA'S COTTAGE - NIGHT

Elara sits alone in her room, the black lantern beside her bed. She pulls the patched gray coat tighter.

ELARA

(whisper)

I have to leave.

EXT. WHISPERWOOD - NIGHT

Elara steps onto the sky-bridge. KAEL darts ahead, playful. THORNE stands at the far end, compass spinning.

KAEL

Come on, little dark one. The wind won't wait.

THORNE

Where was I going again?

Elara crosses.

EXT. FLOATING ISLANDS - SERIES OF SHOTS

The trio sails on wind currents between islands. Kael steals tiny threads of light from passing lanterns, laughing. Moths the size of hands swarm; Thorne's broken compass summons gusts that scatter them. Elara watches, silent.

INT. VEILED PINES FOREST - NIGHT

Trees whisper forgotten ambitions. The group is trapped by wrong winds.

THORNE

I knew the path once. Names slip. Winds stay.

KAEL

Names are boring. Light is better.

Elara tries to steal a thread the way Kael showed her. A small spark flickers inside her lantern.

The spark reveals a vision: Lira alone, crying over an empty cradle of light.

ELARA

(soft)

Mother...

NYRA glides from the mist, veils shifting. Lantern glass in her palms drinks the spark. Thorne clutches his head.

THORNE

I... I don't remember why we're here.

Kael's flame-thread is torn away. He collapses into mist.

KAEL

(distant)

Elara...

EXT. ASHFORGE RUINS - NIGHT

Elara enters alone. A single ember glows in the central pit. NYRA waits.

NYRA

Your darkness calls me. Offer it.

Elara remembers the lullaby. She steps forward and opens the lantern completely.

ELARA

Take the empty part. It's all I have.

The ember flares. Nyra dissolves into ash. Kael reforms from the mist, whole. Thorne's compass stops spinning on true north.

EXT. VESPERA DOCK - DUSK

Elara stands on the same dock. Her lantern casts a steady, quiet glow. Other lanterns drift toward it. Children gather close. Kael sits at her feet. Thorne smiles, remembering.

ELARA

(soft)

It was waiting.

FADE OUT.