

## **SIXTEEN**

### **THE SILVER GUILLOTINE**

Lyra ducked her head at once under the shelter of her wolverine hood, and shuffled in through the double doors with the other children. Time enough later to worry about what she'd say when they came face to face: she had another problem to deal with first, and that was how to hide her furs where she could get at them without asking permission. But luckily, there was such disorder inside, with the adults trying to hurry the children through so as to clear the way for the passengers from the zeppelin, that no one was watching very carefully. Lyra slipped out of the anorak, the leggings, and the boots and bundled them up as small as she could before shoving through the crowded corridors to her dormitory.

Quickly she dragged a locker to the corner, stood on it, and pushed at the ceiling. The panel lifted, just as Roger had said, and into the space beyond she thrust the boots and leggings. As an afterthought, she took the alethiometer from her pouch and hid it in the inmost pocket of the anorak before shoving that through too.

She jumped down, pushed back the locker, and whispered to Pantalaimon, "We must just pretend to be stupid till she sees us, and then say we were kidnapped. And nothing about the gyptians or lorek Byrnison especially."

Because Lyra now realized, if she hadn't done so before, that all the fear in her nature was drawn to Mrs. Coulter as a compass needle is drawn to the Pole. All the other things she'd seen, and even the hideous cruelty of the intercision, she could cope with; she was strong enough; but the thought of that sweet face and gentle voice, the image of that golden playful monkey, was enough to melt her stomach and make her pale and nauseated.

But the gyptians were coming. Think of that. Think of lorek Byrnison. And don't give yourself away, she said, and drifted back toward the canteen, from where a lot of noise was coming.

Children were lining up to get hot drinks, some of them still in their coal-silk anoraks. Their talk was all of the zep-pelin and its passenger.

"It was her—with the monkey daemon—"

"Did she get you, too?"

"She said she'd write to my mum and dad and I bet she never...."

"She never told us about kids getting killed. She never said nothing about that."

"That monkey, he's the worst—he caught my Karossa and nearly killed her—I could feel all weak...."

They were as frightened as Lyra was. She found Annie and the others, and sat down.

"Listen," she said, "can you keep a secret?"

"Yeah!"

The three faces turned to her, vivid with expectation.

"There's a plan to escape," Lyra said quietly.

"There's some people coming to take us away, right, and they'll be here in about a day. Maybe sooner. What we all got to do is be ready as soon as the signal goes and get our cold-weather clothes at once and run out. No waiting about. You just got to run. Only if you don't get your anoraks and boots and stuff, you'll die of cold."

"What signal?" Annie demanded.

"The fire bell, like this afternoon. It's all organized. All the kids're going to know and none of the grownups. Especially not her."

Their eyes were gleaming with hope and excitement. And all through the canteen the message was being passed around. Lyra could tell that the atmosphere had changed. Outside, the children had been energetic and eager for play; then when they had seen Mrs. Coulter they were bubbling with a suppressed hysterical fear; but now there was a control and purpose to their talkativeness. Lyra marveled at the effect hope could have. She watched through the open doorway, but carefully, ready to duck her head, because there were adult voices coming, and then Mrs. Coulter herself was briefly visible, looking in and smiling at the happy children, with their hot drinks and their cake, so warm and well fed. A little shiver ran almost instantaneously through the whole canteen, and every child was still and silent, staring at her.

Mrs. Coulter smiled and passed on without a word. Little by little the talk started again. Lyra said, "Where do they go to talk?"

"Probably the conference room," said Annie. "They took us there once," she added, meaning her and her dasmon. "There was about twenty grownups there and one of 'em was giving a lecture and I had to stand there and do what he told me, like seeing how far my Kyrillion could go away from me, and then he hypnotized me and did some other things....It's a big room with a lot of chairs and tables and a little platform. It's behind the front office. Hey, I bet they're going to pretend the fire drill went off all right. I bet they're scared of her, same as we are...."

For the rest of the day, Lyra stayed close to the other girls, watching, saying little, remaining inconspicuous. There was exercise, there was sewing, there was supper, there was playtime in the lounge: a big shabby room with board games and a few tattered books and a table-tennis table. At some point Lyra and the others became aware that there was some kind of subdued emergency going on, because the adults were hurrying to and fro or standing in anxious groups talking urgently. Lyra guessed they'd discovered the daemons' escape, and were wondering how it had happened.

But she didn't see Mrs. Coulter, which was a relief. When it was time for bed, she knew she had to let the other girls into her confidence.

"Listen," she said, "do they ever come round and see if we're asleep?"

"They just look in once," said Bella. "They just flash a lantern round, they don't really look."

"Good. 'Cause I'm going to go and look round. There's a way through the ceiling that this boy showed me...."

She explained, and before she'd even finished, Annie said, "I'll come with you!"

"No, you better not, 'cause it'll be easier if there's just one person missing. You can all say you fell asleep and you don't know where I've gone."

"But if I came with you—"

"More likely to get caught," said Lyra.

Their two daemons were staring at each other, Pantalaimon as a wildcat, Annie's Kyrillion as a fox. They were quivering. Pantalaimon uttered the lowest, softest hiss and bared his teeth, and

Kyrillion turned aside and began to groom himself unconcernedly.

"All right then," said Annie, resigned.

It was quite common for struggles between children to be settled by their daemons in this way, with one accepting the dominance of the other. Their humans accepted the outcome without resentment, on the whole, so Lyra knew that Annie would do as she asked. They all contributed items of clothing to bulk out Lyra's bed and make it look as if she was still there, and swore to say they knew nothing about it. Then Lyra listened at the door to make sure no one was coming, jumped up on the locker, pushed up the panel, and hauled herself through.

"Just don't say anything," she whispered down to the three faces watching. Then she dropped the panel gently back into place and looked around. She was crouching in a narrow metal channel supported in a framework of girders and struts. The panels of the ceilings were slightly translucent, so some light came up from below, and in the faint gleam Lyra could see this narrow space (only two feet or so in height) extending in all directions

around her. It was crowded with metal ducts and pipes, and it would be easy to get lost in, but provided she kept to the metal and avoided putting any weight on the panels, and as long as she made no noise, she should be able to go from one end of the station to the other.

"It's just like back in Jordan, Pan," she whispered, "looking in the Retiring Room."

"If you hadn't done that, none of this would have happened," he whispered back.

"Then it's up to me to undo it, isn't it?"

She got her bearings, working out approximately which direction the conference room was in, and then set off. It was a far from easy journey. She had to move on hands and knees, because the space was too low to crouch in, and every so often she had to squeeze under a big square duct or lift herself over some heating pipes. The metal channels she crawled in followed the tops of internal walls, as far as she could tell, and as long as she stayed in them she felt a comforting solidity below her; but they were very narrow, and had sharp edges, so sharp that she cut her knuckles



and her knees on them, and before long she was sore all over, and cramped, and dusty.

But she knew roughly where she was, and she could see the dark bulk of her furs crammed in above the dormitory to guide her back. She could tell where a room was empty because the panels were dark, and from time to time she heard voices from below, and stopped to listen, but it was only the cooks in the kitchen, or the nurses in what Lyra, in her Jordan way, thought of as their common room. They were saying nothing interesting, so she moved on.

At last she came to the area where the conference room should be, according to her calculations; and sure enough, there was an area free of any pipework, where air conditioning and heating ducts led down at one end, and where all the panels in a wide rectangular space were lit evenly. She placed her ear to the panel, and heard a murmur of male adult voices, so she knew she had found the right place.

She listened carefully, and then inched her way along till she was as close as she could get to the speakers. Then she lay full length in the metal

channel and leaned her head sideways to hear as well as she could.

There was the occasional clink of cutlery, or the sound of glass on glass as drink was poured, so they were having dinner as they talked. There were four voices, she thought, including Mrs. Coulter's. The other three were men. They seemed to be discussing the escaped dasmons.

"But who is in charge of supervising that section?" said Mrs. Coulter's gentle musical voice.

"A research student called McKay," said one of the men. "But there are automatic mechanisms to prevent this sort of thing happening—"

"They didn't work," she said.

"With respect, they did, Mrs. Coulter. McKay assures us that he locked all the cages when he left the building at eleven hundred hours today. The outer door of course would not have been open in any case, because he entered and left by the inner door, as he normally did. There's a code that has to be entered in the ordinator controlling the locks, and there's a record in its memory of his doing so. Unless that's done, an alarm goes off."

"But the alarm didn't go off," she said.

"It did. Unfortunately, it rang when everyone was outside, taking part in the fire drill."

"But when you went back inside—"

"Unfortunately, both alarms are on the same circuit; that's a design fault that will have to be rectified. What it meant was that when the fire bell was turned off after the practice, the laboratory alarm was turned off as well. Even then it would still have been picked up, because of the normal checks that would have taken place after every disruption of routine; but by that time, Mrs.

Coulter, you had arrived unexpectedly, and if you recall, you asked specifically to meet the laboratory staff there and then, in your room. Consequently, no one returned to the laboratory until some time later."

"I see," said Mrs. Coulter coldly. "In that case, the daemons must have been released during the fire drill itself. And that widens the list of suspects to include every adult in the station. Had you considered that?"

"Had you considered that it might have been done by a child?" said someone else. She was silent, and the second man went on:

"Every adult had a task to do, and every task would have taken their full attention, and every task was done. There is no possibility that any of the staff here could have opened the door. None. So either someone came from outside altogether with the intention of doing that, or one of the children managed to find his way there, open the door and the cages, and return to the front of the main building."

"And what are you doing to investigate?" she said. "No; on second thought, don't tell me. Please understand, Dr. Cooper, I'm not criticizing out of malice. We have to be quite extraordinarily careful. It was an atrocious lapse to have allowed both alarms to be on the same circuit. That must be corrected at once. Possibly the Tartar officer in charge of the guard could help your investigation? I merely mention that as a possibility. Where were the Tartars during the fire drill, by the way? I suppose you have considered that?"

"Yes, we have," said the man wearily. "The guard was fully occupied on patrol, every man. They keep meticulous records."

"I'm sure you're doing your very best," she said. "Well, there we are. A great pity. But enough of that for now. Tell me about the new separator."

Lyra felt a thrill of fear. There was only one thing this could mean.

"Ah," said the doctor, relieved to find the conversation turning to another subject, "there's a real advance. With the first model we could never entirely overcome the risk of „ the patient dying of shock, but we've improved that no end."

"The Skraelings did it better by hand," said a man who hadn't spoken yet.

"Centuries of practice," said the other man.

"But simply tearing was the only option for some time," said the main speaker,

"however distressing that was to the adult operators. If you remember, we had to discharge quite a number for reasons of stress-related

anxiety. But the first big breakthrough was the use of anesthesia combined with the Maystadt anbaric scalpel. We were able to reduce death from operative shock to below five percent."

"And the new instrument?" said Mrs. Coulter. Lyra was trembling. The blood was pounding in her ears, and Pantalaimon was pressing his ermine form against her side, and whispering, "Hush, Lyra, they won't do it—we won't let them do it—"

"Yes, it was a curious discovery by Lord Asriel himself that gave us the key to the new method. He discovered that an alloy of manganese and titanium has the property of insulating body from daemon. By the way, what is happening with Lord Asriel?"

"Perhaps you haven't heard," said Mrs. Coulter.

"Lord Asriel is under suspended sentence of death. One of the conditions of his exile in Svalbard was that he give up his philosophical work entirely. Unfortunately, he managed to obtain books and materials, and he's pushed his heretical investigations to the point where it's positively dangerous to let him live. At any rate, it seems that the Vatican Council has begun to debate the

question of the sentence of death, and the probability is that it'll be carried out. But your new instrument, Doctor. How does it work?"

"Ah—yes—sentence of death, you say? Gracious God...I'm sorry. The new instrument.

We're investigating what happens when the intercision is made with the patient in a conscious state, and of course that couldn't be done with the Maystadt process. So we've developed a kind of guillotine, I suppose you could say. The blade is made of manganese and titanium alloy, and the child is placed in a compartment—like a small cabin— of alloy mesh, with the daemon in a similar compartment connecting with it. While there is a connection, of course, the link remains. Then the blade is brought down between them, severing the link at once. They are then separate entities."

"I should like to see it," she said. "Soon, I hope. But I'm tired now. I think I'll go to bed. I want to see all the children tomorrow. We shall find out who opened that door."

There was the sound of chairs being pushed back, polite expressions, a door closing. Then Lyra heard

the others sit down again, and go on talking, but more quietly.

"What is Lord Asriel up to?"

"I think he's got an entirely different idea of the nature of Dust. That's the point. It's profoundly heretical, you see, and the Consistorial Court of Discipline can't allow any other interpretation than the authorized one. And besides, he wants to experiment—"

"To experiment? With Dust?"

"Hush! Not so loud..."

"Do you think she'll make an unfavorable report?"

"No, no. I think you dealt with her very well."

"Her attitude worries me...."

"Not philosophical, you mean?"

"Exactly. A personal interest. I don't like to use the word, but it's almost ghoulish."

"That's a bit strong."

"But do you remember the first experiments, when she was so keen to see them pulled apart—"



Lyra,couldn't help it: a little cry escaped her, and at the same time she tensed and shivered, and her foot knocked against a stanchion.

"What was that?"

"In the ceiling—"

"Quick!"

The sound of chairs being thrown aside, feet running, a table pulled across the floor. Lyra tried to scramble away, but there was so little space, and before she could move more than a few yards the ceiling panel beside her was thrust up suddenly, and she was looking into the startled face of a man. She was close enough to see every hair in his moustache. He was as startled as she was, but with more freedom to move, he was able to thrust a hand into the gap and seize her arm.

"A child!"

"Don't let her go—"

Lyra sank her teeth into his large freckled hand. He cried out, but didn't let go, even when she drew blood. Pan-talaimon was snarling and spitting, but it was no good, the man was much stronger than she was, and he pulled and pulled until her other

hand, desperately clinging to the stanchion, had to loosen, and she half-fell through into the room.

Still she didn't utter a sound. She hooked her legs over the sharp edge of the metal above, and struggled upside down, scratching, biting, punching, spitting in passionate fury. The men were gasping and grunting with pain or exertion, but they pulled and pulled.

And suddenly all the strength went out of her.

It was as if an alien hand had reached right inside where no hand had a right to be, and wrenched at something deep and precious.

She felt faint, dizzy, sick, disgusted, limp with shock.

One of the men was holding Pantalaimon.

He had seized Lyra's daemon in his human hands, and poor Pan was shaking, nearly out of his mind with horror and disgust. His wildcat shape, his fur now dull with weakness, now sparking glints of anbaric alarm...He curved toward his Lyra as she reached with both hands for him....

They fell still. They were captured.

She felt those hands....It wasn't allowed....Not supposed to touch... Wrong....

"Was she on her own?"

A man was peering into the ceiling space.

"Seems to be on her own...."

"Who is she?"

"The new child."

"The one the Samoyed hunters..."

"Yes."

"You don't suppose she...the daemons..."

"Could well be. But not on her own, surely?"

"Should we tell—"

"I think that would put the seal on things, don't you?"

"I agree. Better she doesn't hear at all."

"But what can we do about this?"

"She can't go back with the other children."

"Impossible!"

"There's only one thing we can do, it seems to me."

"Now?"

"Have to. Can't leave it till the morning. She wants to watch."

"We could do it ourselves. No need to involve anyone else."

The man who seemed to be in charge, the man who wasn't holding either Lyra or Pantalaimon, tapped his teeth with a thumbnail. His eyes were never still; they flicked and slid and darted this way and that. Finally he nodded.

"Now. Do it now," he said. "Otherwise she'll talk. The shock will prevent that, at least. She won't remember who she is, what she saw, what she heard....Come on."

Lyra couldn't speak. She could hardly breathe. She had to let herself be carried through the station, along white empty corridors, past rooms humming with anbaric power, past the dormitories where children slept with their dasmons on the pillow beside them, sharing their dreams; and every second of the way she watched Pantalaimon, and he reached for her, and their eyes never left each other.

Then a door which opened by means of a large wheel; a hiss of air; and a brilliantly lit chamber with dazzling white tiles and stainless steel. The fear she felt was almost a physical pain; it was a physical pain, as they pulled her and Pantalaimon over toward a large cage of pale silver mesh, above which a great pale silver blade hung poised to separate them forever and ever.

She found a voice at last, and screamed. The sound echoed loudly off the shiny surfaces, but the heavy door had hissed shut; she could scream and scream forever, and not a sound would escape.

But Pantalaimon, in answer, had twisted free of those hateful hands—he was a lion, an eagle; he tore at them with vicious talons, great wings beat wildly, and then he was a wolf, a bear, a polecat—darting, snarling, slashing, a succession of transformations too quick to register, and all the time leaping, flying, dodging from one spot to another as their clumsy hands flailed and snatched at the empty air.

But they had daemons too, of course. It wasn't two against three, it was two against six. A badger, an owl, and a baboon were all just as intent to pin

Pantalaimon down, and Lyra was crying to them: "Why? Why are you doing this? Help us! You shouldn't be helping them!"

And she kicked and bit more passionately than ever, until the man holding her gasped and let go for a moment—and she was free, and Pantalaimon sprang toward her like a spark of lightning, and she clutched him to her fierce breast, and he dug his wildcat claws into her flesh, and every stab of pain was dear to her.

"Never! Never! Never!" she cried, and backed against the wall to defend him to their death. But they fell on her again, three big brutal men, and she was only a child, shocked and terrified; and they tore Pantalaimon away, and threw her into one side of the cage of mesh and carried him, struggling still, around to the other. There was a mesh barrier between them, but he was still part of her, they were still joined. For a second or so more, he was still her own dear soul.

Above the panting of the men, above her own sobs, above the high wild howl of her daemon, Lyra heard a humming sound, and saw one man (bleeding from the nose) operate a bank of

switches. The other two looked up, and her eyes followed theirs. The great pale silver blade was rising slowly, catching the brilliant light. The last moment in her complete life was going to be the worst by far.

"What is going on here?"

A light, musical voice: her voice. Everything stopped.

"What are you doing? And who is this child—"

She didn't complete the word child, because in that instant she recognized Lyra. Through tear-blurred eyes Lyra saw her totter and clutch at a bench; her face, so beautiful and composed, grew in a moment haggard and horror-struck.

"Lyra—" she whispered.

The golden monkey darted from her side in a flash, and tugged Pantalaimon out from the mesh cage as Lyra fell out herself. Pantalaimon pulled free of the monkey's solicitous paws and stumbled to Lyra's arms.

"Never, never," she breathed into his fur, and he pressed his beating heart to hers. They clung together like survivors of a shipwreck, shivering on a desolate coast. Dimly she heard Mrs. Coulter speaking to the men, but she couldn't even interpret her tone of voice. And then they were leaving that hateful room, and Mrs. Coulter was half-carrying, half-supporting her along a corridor, and then there was a door, a bedroom, scent in the air, soft light.

Mrs. Coulter laid her gently on the bed. Lyra's arm was so tight around Pantalaimon that she was trembling with the force of it. A tender hand stroked her head.

"My dear, dear child," said that sweet voice.

"However did you come to be here?"