

## **TWENTY-THREE**

### **THE BRIDGE TO THE STARS**

Once Iorek Byrnison was out of sight, Lyra felt a great weakness coming over her, and she turned blindly and felt for Pantalaimon, "Oh, Pan, dear, I can't go on! I'm so frightened—and so tired—all this way, and I'm scared to death! I wish it was someone else instead of me, I do honestly!"

Her daemon nuzzled at her neck in his cat form, warm and comforting.

"I just don't know what we got to do," Lyra sobbed. "It's too much for us, Pan, we can't..."

She clung to him blindly, rocking back and forth and letting the sobs cry out wildly over the bare snow.

"And even if—if Mrs. Coulter got to Roger first, there'd be no saving him, because she'd take him back to Bolvangar, or worse, and they'd kill me out of vengeance....Why do they do these things to children, Pan? Do they all hate children so much, that they want to tear them apart like this? Why do they do it?"

But Pantalaimon had no answer; all he could do was hug her close. Little by little, as the storm of fear subsided, she came to a sense of herself again. She was Lyra, cold and frightened by all means, but herself.

"I wish..." she said, and stopped. There was nothing that could be gained by wishing for it. A final deep shaky breath, and she was ready to go on. The moon had set by now, and the sky to the south was profoundly dark, though the billions of stars lay on it like diamonds on velvet. They were outshone, though, by the Aurora, outshone a hundred times. Never had Lyra seen it so brilliant and dramatic; with every twitch and shiver, new miracles of light danced across the sky. And behind the ever-changing gauze of light, that other world, that sunlit city, was clear and solid. The higher they climbed, the more the bleak land spread out below them. To the north lay the frozen sea, compacted here and there into ridges where two sheets of ice had pressed together, but otherwise flat and white and endless, reaching to the Pole itself and far beyond, featureless, lifeless, colorless, and bleak beyond Lyra's imagination. To the east and west

were more mountains, great jagged peaks thrusting sharply upward, their scarps piled high with snow and raked by the wind into bladelike edges as sharp as scimitars. To the south lay the way they had come, and Lyra looked most longingly back, to see if she could spy her dear friend Iorek Byrnison and his troops; but nothing stirred on the wide plain. She was not even sure if she could see the burned wreckage of the zeppelin, or the crimson-stained snow around the corpses of the warriors. Pantalaimon flew high, and swooped back to her wrist in his owl form.

"They're just beyond the peak!" he said. "Lord Asriel's laid out all his instruments, and Roger can't get away—"

And as he said that, the Aurora nickered and dimmed, like an anbaric bulb at the end of its life, and then went out altogether. In the gloom, though, Lyra sensed the presence of the Dust, for the air seemed to be full of dark intentions, like the forms of thoughts not yet born.

In the enfolding dark she heard a cry:

"Lyra! Lyra!"

"I'm coming!" she cried back, and stumbled upward, clambering, sprawling, struggling, at the end of her strength; but hauling herself on and further on through the ghostly- gleaming snow.

"Lyra! Lyra!"

"I'm nearly there," she gasped. "Nearly there, Roger!"

Pantalaimon was changing rapidly, in his agitation: lion, ermine, eagle, wildcat, hare, salamander, owl, leopard, every form he'd ever taken, a kaleidoscope of forms among the Dust—

"Lyra!"

Then she reached the summit, and saw what was happening.

Fifty yards away in the starlight Lord Asriel was twisting together two wires that led to his upturned sledge, on which stood a row of batteries and jars and pieces of apparatus, already frosted with crystals of cold. He was dressed in heavy furs, his face illuminated by the flame of a naphtha lamp. Crouching like the Sphinx beside him was his daemon, her beautiful spotted coat glossy with

power, her tail moving lazily in the snow. In her mouth she held Roger's daemon.

The little creature was struggling, flapping, fighting, one moment a bird, the next a dog, then a cat, a rat, a bird again, and calling every moment to Roger himself, who was a few yards off, straining, trying to pull away against the heart-deep tug, and crying out with the pain and the cold. He was calling his daemon's name, and calling Lyra; he ran to Lord Asriel and plucked his arm, and Lord Asriel brushed him aside. He tried again, crying and pleading, begging, sobbing, and Lord Asriel took no notice except to knock him to the ground.

They were on the edge of a cliff. Beyond them was nothing but a huge illimitable dark. They were a thousand feet or more above the frozen sea.

All this Lyra saw by starlight alone; but then, as Lord Asriel connected his wires, the Aurora blazed all of a sudden into brilliant life. Like the long finger of blinding power that plays between two terminals, except that this was a thousand miles high and ten thousand miles long: dipping, soaring, undulating, glowing, a cataract of glory.

He was controlling it...

Or leading power down from it; for there was a wire running off a huge reel on the sledge, a wire that ran directly upward to the sky. Down from the dark swooped a raven, and Lyra knew it for a witch daemon. A witch was helping Lord Asriel, and she had flown that wire into the heights.

And the Aurora was blazing again.

He was nearly ready.

He turned to Roger and beckoned, and Roger helplessly came, shaking his head, begging, crying, but helplessly going forward.

“No! Run!” Lyra cried, and hurled herself down the slope at him.

Pantalaimon leaped at the snow leopard and snatched Roger's daemon from her jaws. In a moment the snow leopard had leaped after him, and Pantalaimon let the other daemon go, and both young daemons, changing flick-flick-flick, turned and battled with the great spotted beast.

She slashed left-right with needle-filled paws, and her snarling roar drowned even Lyra's cries. Both children were fighting her, too; or fighting the

forms in the turbid air, those dark intentions, that came thick and crowding down the streams of Dust—

And the Aurora swayed above, its continual surging flicker picking out now this building, now that lake, now that row of palm trees, so close you'd think that you could step from this world to that. Lyra leaped up and seized Roger's hand.

She pulled hard, and then they tore away from Lord Asriel and ran, hand in hand, but Roger cried and twisted, because his daemon was caught again, held fast in the snow leopard's jaws, and Lord Asriel himself was reaching down toward her with a wire; and Lyra knew the heart-convulsing pain of separation, and tried to stop—

But they couldn't stop.

The cliff was sliding away beneath them.

An entire shelf of snow, sliding inexorably down—

The frozen sea, a thousand feet below—

“LYRA!”

Her heartbeats, leaping in anguish with Roger's—

Tight-clutching hands—

His body, suddenly limp in hers; and high above, the greatest wonder.

At the moment he fell still, the vault of heaven, star-studded, profound, was pierced as if by a spear.

A jet of light, a jet of pure energy released like an arrow from a great bow, shot upward from the spot where Lord Asriel had joined the wire to Roger's daemon. The sheets of light and color that were the Aurora tore apart; a great rending, grinding, crunching, tearing sound reached from one end of the universe to the other; there was dry land in the sky—

Sunlight!

Sunlight shining on the fur of a golden monkey....

For the fall of the snow shelf had halted; perhaps an unseen ledge had broken its fall; and Lyra could see, over the trampled snow of the summit, the golden monkey spring out of the air to the side of the leopard, and she saw the two daemons bristle, wary and powerful. The monkey's tail was erect, the snow leopard's swept powerfully from side to side. Then the monkey reached out a tentative paw, the



leopard lowered her head with a graceful sensual acknowledgment, they touched—

And when Lyra looked up from them, Mrs. Coulter herself stood there, clasped in Lord Asriel's arms. Light played around them like sparks and beams of intense anbaric power. Lyra, helpless, could only imagine what had happened: somehow Mrs. Coulter must have crossed that chasm, and followed her up here....

Her own parents, together!

And embracing so passionately: an undreamed-of thing.

Her eyes were wide. Roger's body lay in her arms, still, quiet, at rest. She heard her parents talking:

Her mother said, "They'll never allow it—"

Her father said, "Allow it? We've gone beyond being allowed, as if we were children. I've made it possible for anyone to cross, if they wish."

"They'll forbid it! They'll seal it off and excommunicate anyone who tries!"

"Too many people will want to. They won't be able to prevent them. This will mean the end of the

Church, Marisa, the end of the Magisterium, the end of all those centuries of darkness! Look at that light up there: that's the sun of another world! Feel the warmth of it on your skin, now!"

"They are stronger than anyone, Asriel! You don't know—"

"I don't know? I? No one in the world knows better than I how strong the Church is! But it isn't strong enough for this. The Dust will change everything, anyway. There's no stopping it now."

"Is that what you wanted? To choke us and kill us all with sin and darkness?"

"I wanted to break out, Marisa! And I have. Look, look at the palm trees waving on the shore! Can you feel that wind? A wind from another world! Feel it on your hair, on your face...."

Lord Asriel pushed back Mrs. Coulter's hood and turned her head to the sky, running his hands through her hair. Lyra watched breathless, not daring to move a muscle. The woman clung to Lord Asriel as if she were dizzy, and shook her head, distressed.

"No—no—they're coming, Asriel—they know where I've gone—"

"Then come with me, away and out of this world!"

"I daren't—"

"You? Dare not? Your child would come. Your child would dare anything, and shame her mother."

"Then take her and welcome. She's more yours than mine, Asriel."

"Not so. You took her in; you tried to mold her. You wanted her then."

"She was too coarse, too stubborn. I'd left it too late....But where is she now? I followed her footsteps up...."

"You want her, still? Twice you've tried to hold her, and twice she's got away. If I were her, I'd run, and keep on running, sooner than give you a third chance."

His hands, still clasping her head, tensed suddenly and drew her toward him in a passionate kiss. Lyra thought it seemed more like cruelty than love, and looked at their daemons, to see a strange sight: the snow leopard tense, crouching with her claws just

pressing in the golden monkey's flesh, and the monkey relaxed, blissful, swooning on the snow.

Mrs. Coulter pulled fiercely back from the kiss and said, "No, Asriel—my place is in this world, not that—"

"Come with me!" he said, urgent, powerful. "Come and work with me!"

"We couldn't work together, you and I."

"No? You and I could take the universe to pieces and put it together again, Marisa! We could find the source of Dust and stifle it forever! And you'd like to be part of that great work; don't lie to me about it. Lie about everything else, lie about the Oblation Board, lie about your lovers—yes, I know about Boreal, and I care nothing—lie about the Church, lie about the child, even, but don't lie about what you truly want...."

And their mouths were fastened together with a powerful greed. Their daemons were playing fiercely; the snow leopard rolled over on her back, and the monkey raked his claws in the soft fur of her neck, and she growled a deep rumble of pleasure.

"If I don't come, you'll try and destroy me," said Mrs. Coulter, breaking away.

"Why should I want to destroy you?" he said, laughing, with the light of the other world shining around his head. "Come with me, work with me, and I'll care whether you live or die. Stay here, and you lose my interest at once. Don't flatter yourself that I'd give you a second's thought. Now stay and work your mischief in this world, or come with me."

Mrs. Coulter hesitated; her eyes closed, she seemed to sway as if she were fainting; but she kept her balance and opened her eyes again, with an infinite beautiful sadness in them.

"No," she said. "No."

Their daemons were apart again. Lord Asriel reached down and curled his strong fingers into the snow leopard's fur. Then he turned his back and walked away without another word. The golden monkey leaped into Mrs. Coulter's arms, making little sounds of distress, reaching out to the snow leopard as she paced away, and Mrs. Coulter's face was a mask of tears. Lyra could see them glinting; they were real.

Then her mother turned, shaking with silent sobs, and moved down the mountain and out of Lyra's sight.

Lyra watched her coldly, and then looked up toward the sky.

Such a vault of wonders she had never seen.

The city hanging there so empty and silent looked new-made, waiting to be occupied; or asleep, waiting to be woken. The sun of that world was shining into this, making Lyra's hands golden, melting the ice on Roger's wolfskin hood, making his pale cheeks transparent, glistening in his open sightless eyes.

She felt wrenched apart with unhappiness. And with anger, too; she could have killed her father; if she could have torn out his heart, she would have done so there and then, for what he'd done to Roger. And to her: tricking her: how dare he?

She was still holding Roger's body. Pantalaimon was saying something, but her mind was ablaze, and she didn't hear until he pressed his wildcat claws into the back of her hand to make her. She blinked.

"What? What?"

"Dust!" he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"Dust. He's going to find the source of Dust and destroy it, isn't he?"

"That's what he said."

"And the Oblation Board and the Church and Bolvangar and Mrs. Coulter and all, they want to destroy it too, don't they?"

"Yeah...Or stop it affecting people...Why?"

"Because if they all think Dust is bad, it must be good."

She didn't speak. A little hiccup of excitement leaped in her chest.

Pantalaimon went on:

"We've heard them all talk about Dust, and they're so afraid of it, and you know what? We believed them, even though we could see that what they were doing was wicked and evil and wrong....We thought Dust must be bad too, because they were

grown up and they said so. But what if it isn't?  
What if it's—"

She said breathlessly, "Yeah! What if it's really good..."

She looked at him and saw his green wildcat eyes ablaze with her own excitement. She felt dizzy, as if the whole world were turning beneath her.

If Dust were a good thing...If it were to be sought and welcomed and cherished...

"We could look for it too, Pan!" she said. That was what he wanted to hear.

"We could get to it before he does," he went on, "and...."

The enormousness of the task silenced them. Lyra looked up at the blazing sky. She was aware of how small they were, she and her daemon, in comparison with the majesty and vastness of the universe; and of how little they knew, in comparison with the profound mysteries above them.

"We could," Pantalaimon insisted. "We came all this way, didn't we? We could do it."



"We got it wrong, though, Pan. We got it all wrong about Roger. We thought we were helping him...." She choked, and kissed Roger's still face clumsily, several times. "We got it wrong," she said.

"Next time we'll check everything and ask all the questions we can think of, then. We'll do better next time."

"And we'd be alone. Iorek Byrnison couldn't follow us and help. Nor could Farder Coram or Serafina Pekkala, or Lee Scoresby or no one."

"Just us, then. Don't matter. We're not alone, anyway; not like...."

She knew he meant not like Tony Makarios; not like those poor lost daemons at Bolvangar; we're still one being; both of us are one.

"And we've got the alethiometer," she said. "Yeah. I reckon we've got to do it, Pan. We'll go up there and we'll search for Dust, and when we've found it we'll know what to do."

Roger's body lay still in her arms. She let him down gently.

"And we'll do it," she said. She turned away. Behind them lay pain and death and fear; ahead of them

lay doubt, and danger, and fathomless mysteries. But they weren't alone. So Lyra and her dsmon turned away from the world they were born in, and looked toward the sun, and walked into the sky.

END OF BOOK ONE

Philip Pullman has written picture books, plays, and novels for readers of all ages, including *The Subtle Knife*, the second book of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy. He is also the author of *Count Karlstein* and a trilogy of Victorian thrillers featuring Sally Lockhart: *The Ruby in the Smoke*, *Shadow in the North*, and *The Tiger in the Well*.

A graduate of Oxford University with a degree in English, Philip Pullman taught literature for many years at Westminster College. He now writes full-time in Oxford, England, where he lives with his family.

Don't miss THE SEQUEL TO THE GOLDEN COMPASS

The Subtle Knife

His Dark Materials • Book II

by Philip Pullman

The universe has broken wide, and Lyra's friend lies dead. Desperate for answers and set on revenge, Lyra bursts into a new world in pursuit of his killer. Instead, she finds Will, just twelve years old and already a murderer himself. He's on a quest as fierce as Lyra's, and together they strike out into this sunlit otherworld.

But Cittagazze is a strange and haunted place. Soul-eating Specters stalk its streets while, high above, the wingbeats of distant angels sound against the sky. And in the mysterious Torre degli Angeli lurks Cittagazze's deadly secret—an object of extraordinary and devastating power.

On this journey marked by danger, Will and Lyra forge ahead. But with every step and each new horror, they move closer to the greatest threat of all—and the shattering truth of their own destiny.

The Amber Spyglass

His Dark Materials • Book III

by Philip Pullman

The Amber Spyglass brings the intrigue of The Golden Compass and The Subtle Knife to a

heartstopping close, marking the third volume as the most powerful of the trilogy. Along with the return of Lyra, Will, Mrs. Coulter, Lord Asriel, Dr. Mary Malone, and Iorek Byrnison the armored bear, *The Amber Spyglass* introduces a host of new characters: the Mulefa, mysterious wheeled creatures with the power to see Dust; Gallivespian Lord Roke, a hand-high spy-master to Lord Asriel; and Metatron, a fierce and mighty angel. And this final volume brings startling revelations, too: the painful price Lyra must pay to walk through the land of the dead, the haunting power of Dr. Malone's amber spyglass, and the names of who will live—and who will die—for love. And all the while, war rages with the Kingdom of Heaven, a brutal battle that—in its shocking outcome—will reveal the secret of Dust.

In *The Amber Spyglass*, Philip Pullman deftly weaves the cliffhangers and mysteries of *The Golden Compass* and *The Subtle Knife* into an earth-shattering conclusion—and confirms his fantasy trilogy as an undoubted and enduring classic.