

TWENTY

MORTAL COMBAT

Fights between bears were common, and the subject of much ritual. For a bear to kill another was rare, though, and when that happened it was usually by accident, or when one bear mistook the signals from another, as in the case of lorek Byrnison. Cases of straightforward murder, like lofur's killing of his own father, were rarer still.

But occasionally there came circumstances in which the only way of settling a dispute was a fight to the death. And for that, a whole ceremonial was prescribed.

As soon as lofur announced that lorek Byrnison was on his way, and a combat would take place, the combat ground was swept and smoothed, and armorers came up from the fire mines to check lofur's armor. Every rivet was examined, every link tested, and the plates were burnished with the finest sand. Just as much attention was paid to his claws. The gold leaf was rubbed off, and each separate six-inch hook was sharpened and filed to a deadly point. Lyra watched with a growing sickness in the pit of her stomach, for lorek

Byrnison wouldn't be having this attention; he had been marching over the ice for nearly twenty-four hours already without rest or food; he might have been injured in the crash. And she had let him in for this fight without his knowledge. At one point, after Iofur Raknison had tested the sharpness of his claws on a fresh-killed walrus, slicing its skin open like paper, and the power of his crashing blows on the walrus's skull (two blows, and it was cracked like an egg), Lyra had to make an excuse to Iofur and go away by herself to weep with fear.

Even Pantalaimon, who could normally cheer her up, had little to say that was hopeful. All she could do was consult the alethiometer: he is an hour away, it told her, and again, she must trust him; and (this was harder to read) she even thought it was rebuking her for asking the same question twice.

By this time, word had spread among the bears, and every part of the combat ground was crowded. Bears of high rank had the best places, and there was a special enclosure for the she-bears, including, of course, Iofur's wives. Lyra was profoundly curious about she-bears, because she

knew so little about them, but this was no time to wander about asking questions. Instead she stayed close to Iofur Raknison and watched the courtiers around him assert their rank over the common bears from outside, and tried to guess the meaning of the various plumes and badges and tokens they all seemed to wear. Some of the highest-ranking, she saw, carried little manikins like Iofur's rag-doll daemon, trying to curry favor, perhaps, by imitating the fashion he'd begun. She was sardonically pleased to notice that when they saw that Iofur had discarded his, they didn't know what to do with theirs. Should they throw them away? Were they out of favor now? How should they behave?

{ Because that was the prevailing mood in his court, she was beginning to see. They weren't sure what they were. They weren't like Iorek Byrnison, pure and certain and absolute; there was a constant pall of uncertainty hanging over them, as they watched one another and watched Iofur.

And they watched her, with open curiosity. She remained modestly close to Iofur and said nothing, lowering her eyes whenever a bear looked at her.

The fog had lifted by this time, and the air was clear; and as chance would have it, the brief lifting of darkness toward noon coincided with the time Lyra thought Iorek was going to arrive. As she stood shivering on a little rise of dense-packed snow at the edge of the combat ground, she looked up toward the faint lightness in the sky, and longed with all her heart to see a flight of ragged elegant black shapes descending to bear her away; or to see the Aurora's hidden city, where she would be able to walk safely along those broad boulevards in the sunlight; or to see Ma Costa's broad arms, to smell the friendly smells of flesh and cooking that enfolded you in her presence....

She found herself crying, with tears that froze almost as soon as they formed, and which she had to brush away painfully. She was so frightened. Bears, who didn't cry, couldn't understand what was happening to her; it was some human process, meaningless. And of course Pantalaimon couldn't comfort her as he normally would, though she kept her hand in her pocket firmly around his warm little mouse-form, and he nuzzled at her fingers. Beside her, the smiths were making the final adjustments

to Iofur Raknison's armor. He reared like a great metal tower, shining in polished steel, the smooth plates inlaid with wires of gold; his helmet enclosed the upper part of his head in a glistening carapace of silver-gray, with deep eye slits; and the underside of his body was protected by a close-fitting sark of chain mail. It was when she saw this that Lyra realized that she had betrayed Iorek Byrnison, for Iorek had nothing like it. His armor protected only his back and sides. She looked at Iofur Raknison, so sleek and powerful, and felt a deep sickness in her, like guilt and fear combined.

She said "Excuse me, Your Majesty, if you remember what I said to you before..."

Her shaking voice felt thin and weak in the air. Iofur Raknison turned his mighty head, distracted from the target three bears were holding up in front for him to slash at with his perfect claws.

"Yes? Yes?"

"Remember, I said I'd better go and speak to Iorek Byrnison first, and pretend—"

But before she could even finish her sentence, there was a roar from the bears on the watchtower.

The others all knew what it meant and took it up with a triumphant excitement. They had seen lorek.

"Please?" Lyra said urgently. "I'll fool him, you'll see."

"Yes. Yes. Go now. Go and encourage him!"

Iofur Raknison was hardly able to speak for rage and excitement.

Lyra left his side and walked across the combat ground, bare and clear as it was, leaving her little footprints in the snow, and the bears on the far side parted to let her through. As their great bodies lumbered aside, the horizon opened, gloomy in the pallor of the light. Where was lorek Byrnison? She could see nothing; but then, the watchtower was high, and they could see what was still hidden from her. All she could do was walk forward in the snow.

He saw her before she saw him. There was a bounding and a heavy clank of metal, and in a flurry of snow lorek Byrnison stood beside her.

"Oh, lorek! I've done a terrible thing! My dear, you're going to have to fight Iofur Raknison, and

you en't ready— you're tired and hungry, and your armor's—”

“What terrible thing?”

“I told him you was coming, because I read it on the symbol reader; and he's desperate to be like a person and have a daemon, just desperate. So I tricked him into thinking that I was your daemon, and I was going to desert you and be his instead, but he had to fight you to make it happen. Because otherwise, lorek, dear, they'd never let you fight, they were going to just burn you up before you got close—”

“You tricked Iofur Raknison?”

“Yes. I made him agree that he'd fight you instead of just killing you straight off like an outcast, and the winner would be king of the bears. I had to do that, because—”

“Belacqua? No. You are Lyra Silvertongue,” he said. “To fight him is all I want. Come, little daemon.”

She looked at lorek Byrnison in his battered armor, lean and ferocious, and felt as if her heart would burst with pride.

They walked together toward the massive hulk of Iofur's palace, where the combat ground lay flat and open at the foot of the walls. Bears clustered at the battlements, white faces filled every window, and their heavy forms stood like a dense wall of misty white ahead, marked with the black dots of eyes and noses. The nearest ones moved aside, making two lines for Iorek Byrnison and his daemon to walk between. Every bear's eyes were fixed on them.

Iorek halted across the combat ground from Iofur Raknison. The king came down from the rise of trodden snow, and the two bears faced each other several yards apart. Lyra was so close to Iorek that she could feel a trembling in him like a great dynamo, generating mighty anbaric forces. She touched him briefly on the neck at the edge of his helmet and said, "Fight well, Iorek my dear. You're the real king, and he en't. He's nothing."

Then she stood back.

"Bears!" Iorek Byrnison roared. An echo rang back from the palace walls and startled birds out of their nests. He went on: "The terms of this combat are these. If Iofur Raknison kills me, then he will be

king forever, safe from challenge or dispute. If I kill Iofur Raknison, I shall be your king. My first order to you all will be to tear down that palace, that perfumed house of mockery and tinsel, and hurl the gold and marble into the sea. Iron is bear-metal. Gold is not. Iofur Raknison has polluted Svalbard. I have come to cleanse it. Iofur Raknison, I challenge you."

Then Iofur bounded forward a step or two, as if he could hardly hold himself back.

"Bears!" he roared in his turn. "Iofur Byrnison has come back at my invitation. I drew him here. It is for me to make the terms of this combat, and they are these: if I kill Iofur Byrnison, his flesh shall be torn apart and scattered to the cliff-ghasts. His head shall be displayed above my palace. His memory shall be obliterated. It shall be a capital crime to speak his name...."

He continued, and then each bear spoke again. It was a formula, a ritual faithfully followed. Lyra looked at the two of them, so utterly different: Iofur so glossy and powerful, immense in his strength and health, splendidly armored, proud and kinglike; and Iofur smaller, though she had

never thought he would look small, and poorly equipped, his armor rusty and dented. But his armor was his soul. He had made it and it fitted him. They were one. Iofur was not content with his armor; he wanted another soul as well. He was restless while lorek was still.

And she was aware that all the other bears were making the comparison too. But lorek and Iofur were more than just two bears. There were two kinds of beardom opposed here, two futures, two destinies. Iofur had begun to take them in one direction, and lorek would take them in another, and in the same moment, one future would close forever as the other began to unfold.

As their ritual combat moved toward the second phase, the two bears began to prowl restlessly on the snow, edging forward, swinging their heads. There was not a flicker of movement from the spectators: but all eyes followed them.

Finally the warriors were still and silent, watching each other face to face across the width of the combat ground.

Then with a roar and a blur of snow both bears moved at the same moment. Like two great masses

of rock balanced on adjoining peaks and shaken loose by an earthquake, which bound down the mountainsides gathering speed, leaping over crevasses and knocking trees into splinters, until they crash into each other so hard that both are smashed to powder and flying chips of stone: that was how the two bears came together. The crash as they met resounded in the still air and echoed back from the palace wall. But they weren't destroyed, as rock would have been. They both fell aside, and the first to rise was lorek. He twisted up in a lithe spring and grappled with lofur, whose armor had been damaged by the collision and who couldn't easily raise his head. lorek made at once for the vulnerable gap at his neck. He raked the white fur, and then hooked his claws beneath the edge of lofur's helmet and wrenched it forward.

Sensing the danger, lofur snarled and shook himself as Lyra had seen lorek shake himself at the water's edge, sending sheets of water flying high into the air. And lorek fell away, dislodged, and with a screech of twisting metal lofur stood up tall, straightening the steel of his back plates by sheer

strength. Then like an avalanche he hurled himself down on lorek, who was still trying to rise.

Lyra felt her own breath knocked out of her by the force of that crashing fall. Certainly the very ground shook beneath her. How could lorek survive that? He was struggling to twist himself and gain a purchase on the ground, but his feet were uppermost, and lofur had fixed his teeth somewhere near lorek's throat. Drops of hot blood were flying through the air: one landed on Lyra's furs, and she pressed her hand to it like a token of love. Then lorek's rear claws dug into the links of lofur's chain-mail sark and ripped downward. The whole front came away, and lofur lurched sideways to look at the damage, leaving lorek to scramble upright again.

For a moment the two bears stood apart, getting their breath back. lofur was hampered now by that chain mail, because from a protection it had changed all at once into a hindrance: it was still fastened at the bottom, and trailed around his rear legs. However, lorek was worse off. He was bleeding freely from a wound at his neck, and panting heavily.

But he leaped at Iofur before the king could disentangle himself from the clinging chain mail, and knocked him head over heels, following up with a lunge at the bare part of Iofur's neck, where the edge of the helmet was bent. Iofur threw him off, and then the two bears were at each other again, throwing up fountains of snow that sprayed in all directions and sometimes made it hard to see who had the advantage.

Lyra watched, hardly daring to breathe, and squeezing her hands together so tight it hurt. She thought she saw Iofur tearing at a wound in Iorek's belly, but that couldn't be right, because a moment later, after another convulsive explosion of snow, both bears were standing upright like boxers, and Iorek was slashing with mighty claws at Iofur's face, with Iofur hitting back just as savagely.

Lyra trembled at the weight of those blows. As if a giant were swinging a sledgehammer, and that hammer were armed with five steel spikes... Iron clanged on iron, teeth crashed on teeth, breath roared harshly, feet thundered on the hard-packed ground. The snow around was splashed with red and trodden down for yards into a crimson mud.

lofur's armor was in a pitiful state by this time, the plates torn and distorted, the gold inlay torn out or smeared thickly with blood, and his helmet gone altogether. lorek's was in much better condition, for all its ugliness: dented, but intact, standing up far better to the great sledgehammer blows of the bear-king, and turning aside those brutal six-inch claws.

But against that, lofur was bigger and stronger than lorek, and lorek was weary and hungry, and had lost more blood. He was wounded in the belly, on both arms, and at the neck, whereas lofur was bleeding only from his lower jaw. Lyra longed to help her dear friend, but what could she do?

And it was going badly for lorek now. He was limping; every time he put his left forepaw on the ground, they could see that it hardly bore his weight. He never used it to strike with, and the blows from his right hand were feeble, too, almost little pats compared with the mighty crushing buffets he'd delivered only a few minutes before. lofur had noticed. He began to taunt lorek, calling him broken-hand, whimpering cub, rust-eaten, soon-to-die, and other names, all the while

swinging blows at him from right and left which lorek could no longer parry. lorek had to move backward, a step at a time, and to crouch low under the rain of blows from the jeering bear-king.

Lyra was in tears. Her dear, her brave one, her fearless defender, was going to die, and she would not do him the treachery of looking away, for if he looked at her he must see her shining eyes and their love and belief, not a face hidden in cowardice or a shoulder fearfully turned away.

So she looked, but her tears kept her from seeing what was really happening, and perhaps it would not have been visible to her anyway. It certainly was not seen by lofur. Because lorek was moving backward only to find clean dry footing and a firm rock to leap up from, and the useless left arm was really fresh and strong. You could not trick a bear, but, as Lyra had shown him, lofur did not want to be a bear, he wanted to be a man; and lorek was tricking him.

At last he found what he wanted: a firm rock deep-anchored in the permafrost. He backed against it, tensing his legs and choosing his moment.

It came when lofur reared high above, bellowing his triumph, and turning his head tauntingly toward lorek's apparently weak left side.

That was when lorek moved. Like a wave that has been building its strength over a thousand miles of ocean, and which makes little stir in the deep water, but which when it reaches the shallows rears itself up high into the sky, terrifying the shore dwellers, before crashing down on the land with irresistible power—so lorek Byrnison rose up against lofur, exploding upward from his firm footing on the dry rock and slashing with a ferocious left hand at the exposed jaw of lofur Raknison.

It was a horrifying blow. It tore the lower part of his jaw clean off, so that it flew through the air scattering blood drops in the snow many yards away.

lofur's red tongue lolled down, dripping over his open throat. The bear-king was suddenly voiceless, biteless, helpless, lorek needed nothing more. He lunged, and then his teeth were in lofur's throat, and he shook and shook this way, that way, lifting the huge body off the ground and battering it

down as if lofur were no more than a seal at the water's edge.

Then he ripped upward, and lofur Raknison's life came away in his teeth. There was one ritual yet to perform. lorek sliced open the dead king's unprotected chest, peeling the fur back to expose the narrow white and red ribs like the timbers of an upturned boat. Into the rib cage lorek reached, and he plucked out lofur's heart, red and steaming, and ate it there in front of lofur's subjects.

Then there was acclamation, pandemonium, a crush of bears surging forward to pay homage to lofur's conqueror.

lorek Byrnison's voice rose above the clamor.

"Bears! Who is your king?"

And the cry came back, in a roar like that of all the sea-smooth pebbles in the world in an ocean-battering storm:

"lorek Byrnison!"

The bears knew what they must do. Every single badge and sash and coronet was thrown off at once and trampled contemptuously underfoot, to be forgotten in a moment. They were lorek's bears

now, and true bears, not uncertain semi-humans conscious only of a torturing inferiority. They swarmed to the palace and began to hurl great blocks of marble from the topmost towers, rocking the battlemented walls with their mighty fists until the stones came loose, and then hurling them over the cliffs to crash on the jetty hundreds of feet below.

lorek ignored them and unhooked his armor to attend to his wounds, but before he could begin, Lyra was beside him, stamping her foot on the frozen scarlet snow and shouting to the bears to stop smashing the palace, because there were prisoners inside. They didn't hear, but lorek did, and when he roared they stopped at once.

"Human prisoners?" lorek said.

"Yes—Iofur Raknison put them in the dungeons—they ought to come out first and get shelter somewhere, else they'll be killed with all the falling rocks—"

lorek gave swift orders, and some bears hurried into the palace to release the prisoners. Lyra turned to lorek.

"Let me help you—I want to make sure you en't too badly hurt, lorek dear—oh, I wish there was some bandages or something! That's an awful cut on your belly—"

A bear laid a mouthful of some stiff green stuff, thickly frosted, on the ground at lorek's feet.

"Bloodmoss," said lorek. "Press it in the wounds for me, Lyra. Fold the flesh over it and then hold some snow there till it freezes."

He wouldn't let any bears attend to him, despite their eagerness. Besides, Lyra's hands were deft, and she was desperate to help; so the small human bent over the great bear-king, packing in the bloodmoss and freezing the raw flesh till it stopped bleeding. When she had finished, her mittens were sodden with lorek's blood, but his wounds were stanchd.

And by that time the prisoners—a dozen or so men, shivering and blinking and huddling together—had come out. There was no point in talking to the professor, Lyra decided, because the poor man was mad; and she would have liked to know who the other men were, but there were many other urgent things to do. And she didn't

want to distract lorek, who was giving rapid orders and sending bears scurrying this way and that, but she was anxious about Roger, and about Lee Scoresby and the witches, and she was hungry and tired....

She thought the best thing she could do just then was to keep out of the way. So she curled up in a quiet corner of the combat ground with Pantalaimon as a wolverine to keep her warm, and piled snow over herself as a bear would do, and went to sleep. Something nudged her foot, and a strange bear voice said, "Lyra Silvertongue, the king wants you."

She woke up nearly dead with cold, and couldn't open her eyes, for they had frozen shut; but Pantalaimon licked them to melt the ice on her eyelashes, and soon she was able to see the young bear speaking to her in the moonlight.

She tried to stand, but fell over twice.

The bear said, "Ride on me," and crouched to offer his broad back, and half-clinging, half-falling, she managed to stay on while he took her to a steep hollow, where many bears were assembled.

And among them was a small figure who ran toward her, and whose daemon leaped up to greet Pantalaimon.

"Roger!" she said.

"Irek Byrnison made me stay out there in the snow while he came to fetch you away—we fell out the balloon, Lyra! After you fell out, we got carried miles and miles, and then Mr. Scoresby let some more gas out and we crashed into a mountain, and we fell down such a slope like you never seen! And I don't know where Mr. Scoresby is now, nor the witches. There was just me and Irek Byrnison. He come straight back this way to look for you. And they told me about his fight...."

Lyra looked around. Under the direction of an older bear, the human prisoners were building a shelter out of driftwood and scraps of canvas. They seemed pleased to have some work to do. One of them was striking a flint to light a fire.

"There is food," said the young bear who had woken Lyra. A fresh seal lay on the snow. The bear sliced it open with a claw and showed Lyra where to find the kidneys. She ate one raw: it was warm and soft and delicious beyond imagining.

"Eat the blubber too," said the bear, and tore off a piece for her. It tasted of cream flavored with hazelnuts. Roger hesitated, but followed her example. They ate greedily, and within a very few minutes Lyra was fully awake and beginning to be warm. Wiping her mouth, she looked around, but lorek was not in sight.

"lorek Byrnison is speaking with his counselors," said the young bear. "He wants to see you when you have eaten. Follow me."

He led them over a rise in the snow to a spot where bears were beginning to build a wall of ice blocks. lorek sat at the center of a group of older bears, and he rose to greet her.

"Lyra Silvertongue," he said. "Come and hear what I am being told."

He didn't explain her presence to the other bears, or perhaps they had learned about her already; but they made room for her and treated her with immense courtesy, as if she were a queen. She felt proud beyond measure to sit beside her friend lorek Byrnison under the Aurora as it flickered gracefully in the polar sky, and join the conversation of the bears.

It turned out that Iofur Raknison's dominance over them had been like a spell. Some of them put it down to the influence of Mrs. Coulter, who had visited him before Lorek's exile, though Lorek had not known about it, and given Iofur various presents.

"She gave him a drug," said one bear, "which he fed secretly to Hjalmur Hjalmurson, and made him forget himself."

Hjalmur Hjalmurson, Lyra gathered, was the bear whom Lorek had killed, and whose death had brought about his exile. So Mrs. Coulter was behind that! And there was more.

"There are human laws that prevent certain things that she was planning to do, but human laws don't apply on Svalbard. She wanted to set up another station here like Bolvangar, only worse, and Iofur was going to allow her to do it, against all the custom of the bears; because humans have visited, or been imprisoned, but never lived and worked here. Little by little she was going to increase her power over Iofur Raknison, and his over us, until we were her creatures running back and forth at her

bidding, and our only duty to guard the abomination she was going to create...."

That was an old bear speaking. His name was S0ren Eisarson, and he was a counselor, one who had suffered under Iofur Raknison.

"What is she doing now, Lyra?" said Iorek Byrnison. "Once she hears of Iofur's death, what will her plans be?"

Lyra took out the alethiometer. There was not much light to see it by, and Iorek commanded that a torch be brought.

"What happened to Mr. Scoresby?" Lyra said while they were waiting. "And the witches?"

"The witches were attacked by another witch clan. I don't know if the others were allied to the child cutters, but they were patrolling our skies in vast numbers, and they attacked in the storm. I didn't see what happened to Serafina Pekkala. As for Lee Scoresby, the balloon soared up again after I fell out with the boy, taking him with it. But your symbol reader will tell you what their fate is."

A bear pulled up a sledge on which a cauldron of charcoal was smoldering, and thrust a resinous

branch into the heart of it. The branch caught at once, and in its glare Lyra turned the hands of the alethiometer and asked about Lee Scoresby. It turned out that he was still aloft, borne by the winds toward Nova Zembla, and that he had been unharmed by the cliff-ghasts and had fought off the other witch clan. Lyra told Iorek, and he nodded, satisfied.

"If he is in the air, he will be safe," he said. "What of Mrs. Coulter?"

The answer was complicated, with the needle swinging from symbol to symbol in a sequence that made Lyra puzzle for a long time. The bears were curious, but restrained by their respect for Iorek Byrnison, and his for Lyra, and she put them out of her mind and sank again into the alethiometric trance.

The play of symbols, once she had discovered the pattern of it, was dismaying.

"It says she's...She's heard about us flying this way, and she's got a transport zeppelin that's armed with machine guns—I think that's it—and they're a flying to Svalbard right now. She don't know yet about Iofur Raknison being beaten, of course, but

she will soon because...Oh yes, because some witches will tell her, and they'll learn it from the cliff-ghasts. So I reckon there are spies in the air all around, lorek. She was coming to...to pretend to help Iofur Raknison, but really she was going to take over power from him, with a regiment of Tartars that's coming by sea, and they'll be here in a couple of days.

"And as soon as she can, she's going to where Lord Asriel is kept prisoner, and she's intending to have him killed. Because ...It's coming clear now: something I never understood before, lorek! It's why she wants to kill Lord Asriel: it's because she knows what he's going to do, and she fears it, and she wants to do it herself and gain control before he does....It must be the city in the sky, it must be! She's trying to get to it first! And now it's telling me something else...."

She bent over the instrument, concentrating furiously as the needle darted this way and that. It moved almost too fast to follow; Roger, looking over her shoulder, couldn't even see it stop, and was conscious only of a swift nickering dialogue between Lyra's fingers turning the hands and the

needle answering, as bewilderingly unlike language as the Aurora was. "Yes," she said finally, putting the instrument down in her lap and blinking and sighing as she woke out of her profound concentration. "Yes, I see what it says. She's after me again.

She wants something I've got, because Lord Asriel wants it too. They need it for this...for this experiment, whatever it is..."

She stopped there, to take a deep breath. Something was troubling her, and she didn't know what it was. She was sure that this something that was so important was the alethiometer itself, because after all, Mrs. Coulter had wanted it, and what else could it be? And yet it wasn't, because the alethiometer had a different way of referring to itself, and this wasn't it.

"I suppose it's the alethiometer," she said unhappily. "It's what I thought all along. I've got to take it to Lord Asriel before she gets it. If she gets it, we'll all die."

As she said that, she felt so tired, so bone-deep weary and sad, that to die would have been a relief. But the example of lorek kept her from admitting

it. She put the alethiometer away and sat up straight.

"How far away is she ?" said lorek.

"Just a few hours. I suppose I ought to take the alethiometer to Lord Asriel as soon as I can."

"I will go with you," said lorek. She didn't argue. While lorek gave commands and organized an armed squad to accompany them on the final part of their journey north, Lyra sat still, conserving her energy. She felt that something had gone out of her during that last reading. She closed her eyes and slept, and presently they woke her and set off.