

SEVEN

JOHN FAA

Now that Lyra had a task in mind, she felt much better. Helping Mrs. Coulter had been all very well, but Pantalaimon was right: she wasn't really doing any work there, she was just a pretty pet. On the gyptian boat, there was real work to do, and Ma Costa made sure she did it. She cleaned and swept, she peeled potatoes and made tea, she greased the propeller shaft bearings, she kept the weed trap clear over the propeller, she washed dishes, she opened lock gates, she tied the boat up at mooring posts, and within a couple of days she was as much at home with this new life as if she'd been born gyptian. What she didn't notice was that the Costas were alert every second for unusual signs of interest in Lyra from the waterside people. If she hadn't realized it, she was important, and Mrs. Coulter and the Oblation Board were bound to be searching everywhere for her.

Indeed, Tony heard from gos-sip in pubs along the way that the police were making raids on houses and farms and building yards and factories without any explanation, though there was a rumor that

they were searching for a missing girl. And that in itself was odd, considering all the kids that had gone missing without being looked for. Gyptians and land folk alike were getting jumpy and nervous.

And there was another reason for the Costas' interest in Lyra; but she wasn't to learn that for a few days yet.

So they took to keeping her below decks when they passed a lockkeeper's cottage or a canal basin, or anywhere there were likely to be idlers hanging about. Once they passed through a town where the police were searching all the boats that came along the waterway, and holding up the traffic in both directions. The Costas were equal to that, though. There was a secret compartment beneath Ma's bunk, where Lyra lay cramped for two hours while the police banged up and down the length of the boat unsuccessfully.

"Why didn't their daemons find me, though?" she asked afterward, and Ma showed her the lining of the secret space: cedarwood, which had a soporific effect on daemons; and it was true that Pantalaimon had spent the whole time happily

asleep by Lyra's head. Slowly, with many halts and detours, the Costas' boat drew nearer the fens, that wide and never fully mapped wilderness of huge skies and endless marshland in Eastern Anglia.

The furthest fringe of it mingled indistinguishably with the creeks and tidal inlets of the shallow sea, and the other side of the sea mingled indistinguishably with Holland; and parts of the fens had been drained and dyked by Hollanders, some of whom had settled there; so the language of the fens was thick with Dutch. But parts had never been drained or planted or settled at all, and in the wildest central regions, where eels slithered and waterbirds flocked, where eerie marsh fires flick-ered and waylurkers tempted careless travelers to their doom in the swamps and bogs, the gyptian people had always found it safe to muster.

And now by a thousand winding channels and creeks and watercourses, gyptian boats were moving in toward the byanplats, the only patch of slightly higher ground in the hundreds of square miles of marsh and bog. There was an ancient wooden meeting hall there with a huddle of

permanent dwellings around it, and wharves and jetties and an eelmarket.

When the gyptians called a byanroping—a summons or muster of families—so many boats filled the waterways that you could walk for a mile in any direction over their decks; or so it was said. The gyptians ruled in the fens. No one else dared enter, and while the gyptians kept the peace and traded fairly, the landlopers turned a blind eye to the incessant smuggling and the occasional feuds. If a gyptian body floated ashore down the coast, or got snagged in a fishnet, well—it was only a gyptian.

Lyra listened enthralled to tales of the fen dwellers, of the great ghost dog Black Shuck, of the marsh fires arising from bubbles of witch oil, and began to think of herself as gyptian even before they reached the fens. She had soon slipped back into her Oxford voice, and now she was acquiring a gyptian one, complete with Fen-Dutch words. Ma Costa had to remind her of a few things.

"You en't gyptian, Lyra. You might pass for gyptian with practice, but there's more to us than gyptian

language. There's deeps in us and strong currents. We're water people all through, and you en't, you're a fire person. What you're most like is marsh fire, that's the place you have in the gyptian scheme; you got witch oil in your soul. Deceptive, that's what you are, child." Lyra was hurt.

"I en't never deceived anyone! You ask..." There was no one to ask, of course, and Ma Costa laughed, but kindly. "Can't you see I'm a paying you a compliment, you gosling?" she said, and Lyra was pacified, though she didn't understand.

When they reached the byanplats it was evening, and the sun was about to set in a splash of bloody sky. The low island and the Zaal were humped blackly against the light, like the clustered buildings around; threads of smoke rose into the still air, and from the press of boats all around came the smells of frying fish, of smokeleaf, of jenniver spirit.

They tied up close to the Zaal itself, at a mooring Tony said had been used by their family for generations. Presently Ma Costa had the frying pan going, with a couple of fat eels hissing and

sputtering and the kettle on for potato powder. Tony and Kerim oiled their hair, put on their finest leather jackets and blue spotted neckerchiefs, loaded their fingers with silver rings, and went to greet some old friends in the neighboring boats and drink a glass or two in the nearest bar. They came back with important news.

"We got here just in time. The Roping's this very night. And they're a saying in the town—what d'you think of this?— they're saying that the missing child's on a gyptian boat, and she's a going to appear tonight at the Roping!"

He laughed loudly and ruffled Lyra's hair. Ever since they'd entered the fens he had been more and more good tempered, as if the savage gloom his face showed outside were only a disguise. And Lyra felt an excitement growing in her breast as she ate quickly and washed the dishes before combing her hair, tucking the alethiometer into the wolfskin coat pocket, and jumping ashore with all the other families making their way up the slope to the Zaal.

She had thought Tony was joking. She soon found that he wasn't, or else that she looked less like a gyptian than she'd thought, for many people

stared, and children pointed, and by the time they reached the great doors of the Zaal they were walking alone between a crowd on either side, who had fallen back to stare and give them room.

And then Lyra began to feel truly nervous. She kept close to Ma Costa, and Pantalaimon became as big as he could and took his panther shape to reassure her. Ma Costa trudged up the steps as if nothing in the world could possibly either stop her or make her go more quickly, and Tony and Kerim walked proudly on either side like princes.

The hall was lit by naphtha lamps, which shone brightly enough on the faces and bodies of the audience, but left the lofty rafters hidden in darkness. The people coming in had to struggle to find room on the floor, where the benches were already crowded; but families squeezed up to make space, children occupying laps and daemons curling up underfoot or perching out of the way on the rough wooden walls.

At the front of the Zaal there was a platform with eight carved wooden chairs set out. As Lyra and the Costas found space to stand along the edge of the hall, eight men appeared from the shadows at

the rear of the platform and stood in front of the chairs. A ripple of excitement swept over the audience as they hushed one another and shoved themselves into spaces on the nearest bench. Finally there was silence and seven of the men on the platform sat down.

The one who remained was in his seventies, but tall and bull necked and powerful. He wore a plain canvas jacket and a checked shirt, like many gyptian men; there was nothing to mark him out but the air of strength and authority he had. Lyra recognized it: Uncle Asriel had it, and so did the Master of Jordan. This man's daemon was a crow, very like the Master's raven.

"That's John Faa, the lord of the western gyptians," Tony whispered.

John Faa began to speak, in a deep slow voice. "Gyptians! Welcome to the Roping. We've come to listen and come to decide. You all know why. There are many families here who've lost a child. Some have lost two. Someone is taking them. To be sure, landlopers are losing children too. We have no quarrel with landlopers over this.

"Now there's been talk about a child and a reward. Here's the truth to stop all gossip. The child's name is Lyra Belacqua, and she's being sought by the landloper police. There is a reward of one thousand sovereigns for giving her up to them. She's a landloper child, and she's in our care, and there she's going to stay. Anyone tempted by those thousand sovereigns had better find a place neither on land nor on water. We en't giving her up."

Lyra felt a blush from the roots of her hair to the soles of her feet; Pantalaimon became a brown moth to hide. Eyes all around were turning to them, and she could only look up at Ma Costa for reassurance.

But John Faa was speaking again:

"Talk all we may, we won't change owt. We must act if we want to change things. Here's another fact for you: the Gobblers, these child thieves, are a taking their prisoners to a town in the far North, way up in the land of dark. I don't know what they do with 'em there. Some folk say they kill 'em, other folk say different. We don't know.

"What we do know is that they do it with the help of the landloper police and the clergy. Every power on land is helping 'em. Remember that. They know what's going on and they'll help it whenever they can.

"So what I'm proposing en't easy. And I need your agreement. I'm proposing that we send a band of fighters up north to rescue them kids and bring 'em back alive. I'm proposing that we put our gold into this, and all the craft and courage we can muster. Yes, Raymond van Gerrit?"

A man in the audience had raised his hand, and John Faa sat down to let him speak.

"Beg pardon, Lord Faa. There's landloper kids as well as gyptians been taken captive. Are you saying we should rescue them as well?"

John Faa stood up to answer.

"Raymond, are you saying we should fight our way through every kind of danger to a little group of frightened children, and then say to some of them that they can come home, and to the rest that they have to stay? No, you're a better man than that. Well, do I have your approval, my friends?"

The question caught them by surprise, for there was a moment's hesitation; but then a full-throated roar filled the hall, and hands were clapped in the air, fists shaken, voices raised in excited clamor. The rafters of the Zaal shook, and from their perches up in the dark a score of sleeping birds woke up in fear and flapped their wings, and little showers of dust drifted down.

John Faa let the noise continue for a minute, and then raised his hand for silence again.

"This'll take a while to organize. I want the heads of the families to raise a tax and muster a levy. We'll meet again here in three days' time. In between now and then I'm a going to talk with the child I mentioned before, and with Farder Coram, and form a plan to put before you when we meet. Goodnight to ye all."

His massive, plain, blunt presence was enough to calm them. As the audience began to move out of the great doors into the chilly evening, to go to their boats or to the crowded bars of the little settlement, Lyra said to Ma Costa:

"Who are the other men on the platform?"

"The heads of the six families, and the other man is Farder Coram."

It was easy to see who she meant by the other man, because he was the oldest one there. He walked with a stick, and all the time he'd been sitting behind John Faa he'd been trembling as if with an ague.

"Come on," said Tony. "I'd best take you up to pay your respects to John Faa. You call him Lord Faa. I don't know what you'll be asked, but mind you tell the truth."

Pantalaimon was a sparrow now, and sat curiously on Lyra's shoulder, his claws deep in the wolfskin coat, as she followed Tony through the crowd up to the platform.

He lifted her up. Knowing that everyone still in the hall was staring at her, and conscious of those thousand sovereigns she was suddenly worth, she blushed and hesitated. Pantalaimon darted to her breast and became a wildcat, sitting up in her arms and hissing softly as he looked around.

Lyra felt a push, and stepped forward to John Faa. He was stern and massive and expressionless, more

like a pillar of rock than a man, but he stooped and held out his hand to shake. When she put hers in, it nearly vanished.

"Welcome, Lyra," he said. Close to, she felt his voice rumbling like the earth itself. She would have been nervous but for Pantalaimon, and the fact that John Faa's stony expression had warmed a little. He was treating her very gently.

"Thank you, Lord Faa," she said.

"Now you come in the parley room and we'll have a talk," said John Faa. "Have they been feeding you proper, the Costas?"

"Oh, yes. We had eels for supper."

"Proper fen eels, I expect."

The parley room was a comfortable place with a big fire, sideboards laden with silver and porcelain, and a heavy table darkly polished by the years, at which twelve chairs were drawn up.

The other men from the platform had gone elsewhere, but the old shaking man was still with them. John Faa helped him to a seat at the table.

"Now, you sit here on my right," John Faa said to Lyra, and took the chair at the head of the table himself. Lyra found herself opposite Farder Coram. She was a little frightened by his skull-like face and his continual trembling. His daemon was a beautiful autumn-colored cat, massive in size, who stalked along the table with upraised tail and elegantly inspected Pantalaimon, touching noses briefly before settling on Farder Coram's lap, half-closing her eyes and purring softly.

A woman whom Lyra hadn't noticed came out of the shadows with a tray of glasses, set it down by John Faa, curtsied, and left. John Faa poured little glasses of jenniver from a stone crock for himself and Farder Coram, and wine for Lyra.

"So," John Faa said. "You run away, Lyra."

"Yes."

"And who was the lady you run away from?"

"She was called Mrs. Coulter. And I thought she was nice, but I found out she was one of the Gobblers. I heard someone say what the Gobblers were, they were called the General Oblation Board, and she was in charge of it, it was all her idea. And

they was all working on some plan, I dunno what it was, only they was going to make me help her get kids for 'em. But they never knew..."

"They never knew what?"

"Well, first they never knew that I knew some kids what had been took. My friend Roger the kitchen boy from Jordan College, and Billy Costa, and a girl out the covered market in Oxford. And another thing...My uncle, right, Lord Asriel. I heard them talking about his journeys to the North, and I don't reckon he's got anything to do with the Gobblers. Because I spied on the Master and the Scholars of Jordan, right, I hid in the Retiring Room where no one's supposed to go except them, and I heard him tell them all about his expedition up north, and the Dust he saw, and he brought back the head of Stanislaus Grumman, what the Tartars had made a hole in. And now the Gobblers've got him locked up somewhere. The armored bears are guarding him. And I want to rescue him."

She looked fierce and stubborn as she sat there, small against the high carved back of the chair. The two old men couldn't help smiling, but whereas Farder Coram's smile was a hesitant, rich,

complicated expression that trembled across his face like sunlight chasing shadows on a windy March day, John Faa's smile was slow, warm, plain, and kindly.

"You better tell us what you did hear your uncle say that evening," said John Faa. "Don't leave anything out, mind. Tell us everything."

Lyra did, more slowly than she'd told the Costas but more honestly, too. She was afraid of John Faa, and what she was most afraid of was his kindness. When she'd finished, Farder Coram spoke for the first time. His voice was rich and musical, with as many tones in it as there were colors in his daemon's fur.

"This Dust," he said. "Did they ever call it anything else, Lyra?"

"No. Just Dust. Mrs. Coulter told me what it was, elementary particles, but that's all she called it."

"And they think that by doing something to children, they can find out more about it?"

"Yes. But I don't know what. Except my uncle...There's something I forgot to tell you. When

he was showing them lantern slides, there was another one he had. It was the Roarer—"

"The what?" said John Faa.

"The Aurora," said Farder Coram. "Is that right, Lyra?"

"Yeah, that's it. And in the lights of the Roarer there was like a city. All towers and churches and domes and that. It was a bit like Oxford, that's what I thought, anyway. And Uncle Asriel, he was more interested in that, I think, but the Master and the other Scholars were more interested in Dust, like Mrs. Coulter and Lord Boreal and them."

"I see," said Farder Coram. "That's very interesting."

"Now, Lyra," said John Faa, "I'm a going to tell you something. Farder Coram here, he's a wise man. He's a seer. He's been a follering all what's been going on with Dust and the Gobblers and Lord Asriel and everything else, and he's been a follering you. Every time the Costas went to Oxford, or half a dozen other families, come to that, they brought back a bit of news. About you, child. Did you know that?"

Lyra shook her head. She was beginning to be frightened. Pantalaimon was growling too deep for anyone to hear, but she could feel it in her fingertips down inside his fur.

"Oh, yes," said John Faa, "all your doings, they all get back to Farder Coram here."

Lyra couldn't hold it in.

"We didn't damage it! Honest! It was only a bit of mud! And we never got very far—"

"What are you talking about, child?" said John Faa.

Farder Coram laughed. When he did that, his shaking stopped and his face became bright and young.

But Lyra wasn't laughing. With trembling lips she said, "And even if we had found the bung, we'd never've took it out! It was just a joke. We wouldn't've sunk it, never!"

Then John Faa began to laugh too. He slapped a broad hand on the table so hard the glasses rang, and his massive shoulders shook, and he had to wipe away the tears from his eyes. Lyra had never seen such a sight, never heard such a bellow; it was like a mountain laughing.

"Oh, yes," he said when he could speak again, "we heard about that too, little girl! I don't suppose the Costas have set foot anywhere since then without being reminded of it. You better leave a guard on your boat, Tony, people say. Fierce little girls round here! Oh, that story went all over the fens, child. But we en't going to punish you for it. No, no! Ease your mind."

He looked at Farder Coram, and the two old men laughed again, but more gently. And Lyra felt contented, and safe.

Finally John Faa shook his head and became serious again.

"I were saying, Lyra, as we knew about you from a child. From a baby. You oughter know what we know. I can't guess what they told you at Jordan College about where you came from, but they don't know the whole truth of it. Did they ever tell you who your parents were?"

Now Lyra was completely dazed.

"Yes," she said. "They said I was—they said they—they said Lord Asriel put me there because my

mother and father died in an airship accident. That's what they told me."

"Ah, did they. Well now, child, I'm a going to tell you a story, a true story. I know it's true, because a gyptian woman told me, and they all tell the truth to John Faa and Farder Coram. So this is the truth about yourself, Lyra. Your father never perished in no airship accident, because your father is Lord Asriel."

Lyra could only sit in wonder.

"Here's how it came about," John Faa went on.

"When he was a young man, Lord Asriel went exploring all over the North, and came back with a great fortune. And he was a high-spirited man, quick to anger, a passionate man.

"And your mother, she was passionate too. Not so well born as him, but a clever woman. A Scholar, even, and those who saw her said she was very beautiful. She and your father, they fell in love as soon's they met.

"The trouble was, your mother was already married. She'd married a politician. He was a member of the

king's party, one of his closest advisers. A rising man.

"Now when your mother found herself with child, she feared to tell her husband the child wasn't his. And when the baby was born—that's you, girl—it was clear from the look of you that you didn't favor her husband, but your true father, and she thought it best to hide you away and give out that you'd died.

"So you was took to Oxfordshire, where your father had estates, and put in the care of a gyptian woman to nurse. But someone whispered to your mother's husband what had happened, and he came a flying down and ransacked the cottage where the gyptian woman had been, only she'd fled to the great house; and the husband followed after, in a murderous passion.

"Lord Asriel was out a hunting, but they got word to him and he came riding back in time to find your mother's husband at the foot of the great staircase. Another moment and he'd have forced open the closet where the gyptian woman was hiding with you, but Lord Asriel challenged him,

and they fought there and then, and Lord Asriel killed him.

"The gyptian woman heard and saw it all, Lyra, and that's how we know.

"The consequence was a great lawsuit. Your father en't the kind of man to deny or conceal the truth, and it left the judges with a problem. He'd killed all right, he'd shed blood, but he was defending his home and his child against an intruder. On t'other hand, the law allows any man to avenge the violation of his wife, and the dead man's lawyers argued that he were doing just that.

"The case lasted for weeks, with volumes of argument back and forth. In the end the judges punished Lord Asriel by confiscating all his property and all his land, and left him a poor man; and he had been richer than a king.

"As for your mother, she wanted nothing to do with it, nor with you. She turned her back. The gyptian nurse told me she'd often been afeared of how your mother would treat you, because she was a proud and scornful woman. So much for her.

"Then there was you. If things had fallen out different, Lyra, you might have been brought up a gyptian, because the nurse begged the court to let her have you; but we gyptians got little standing in the law. The court decided you was to be placed in a priory, and so you were, with the Sisters of Obedience at Watlington. You won't remember.

"But Lord Asriel wouldn't stand for that. He had a hatred of priors and monks and nuns, and being a high-handed man he just rode in one day and carried you off. Not to look after himself, nor to give to the gyptians; he took you to Jordan College, and dared the law to undo it.

"Well, the law let things be. Lord Asriel went back to his explorations, and you grew up at Jordan College. The one thing he said, your father, the one condition he made, was that your mother shouldn't be let see you. If she ever tried to do that, she was to be prevented, and he was to be told, because all the anger in his nature had turned against her now. The Master promised faithfully to do that; and so time passed.

"Then come all this anxiety about Dust. And all over the country, all over the world, wise men and

women too began a worrying about it. It weren't of any account to us gyptians, until they started taking our kids. That's when we got interested. And we got connections in all sorts of places you wouldn't imagine, including Jordan College. You wouldn't know, but there's been someone a watching over you and reporting to us ever since you been there. 'Cause we got an interest in you, and that gyptian woman who nursed you, she never stopped being anxious on your behalf."

"Who was it watching over me?" said Lyra. She felt immensely important and strange, that all her doings should be an object of concern so far away.

"It was a kitchen servant. It was Bernie Johansen, the pastry cook. He's half-gyptian; you never knew that, I'll be bound."

Bernie was a kindly, solitary man, one of those rare people whose daemon was the same sex as himself. It was Bernie she'd shouted at in her despair when Roger was taken. And Bernie had been telling the gyptians everything! She marveled.

"So anyway," John Faa went on, "we heard about you going away from Jordan College, and how it came about at a time when Lord Asriel was

imprisoned and couldn't prevent it. And we remembered what he'd said to the Master that he must never do, and we remembered that the man your mother had married, the politician Lord Asriel killed, was called Edward Coulter."

"Mrs. Coulter?" said Lyra, quite stupefied. "She en't my mother?"

"She is. And if your father had been free, she wouldn't never have dared to defy him, and you'd still be at Jordan, not knowing a thing. But what the Master was a doing letting you go is a mystery I can't explain. He was charged with your care. All I can guess is that she had some power over him."

Lyra suddenly understood the Master's curious behavior on the morning she'd left.

"But he didn't want to..." she said, trying to remember it exactly. "He...I had to go and see him first thing that morning, and I mustn't tell Mrs. Coulter....It was like he wanted to protect me from her..." She stopped, and looked at the two men carefully, and then decided to tell them the whole truth about the Retiring Room. "See, there was something else.

That evening I hid in the Retiring Room, I saw the Master try to poison Lord Asriel. I saw him put some powder in the wine and I told my uncle and he knocked the decanter off the table and spilled it. So I saved his life. I could never understand why the Master would want to poison him, because he was always so kind. Then on the morning I left he called me in early to his study, and I had to go secretly so no one would know, and he said..." Lyra racked her brains to try and remember exactly what it was the Master had said. No good; she shook her head. "The only thing I could understand was that he gave me something and I had to keep it secret from her, from Mrs. Coulter. I suppose it's all right if I tell you...."

She felt in the pocket of the wolfskin coat and took out the velvet package. She laid it on the table, and she sensed John Faa's massive simple curiosity and Farder Coram's bright flickering intelligence both trained on it like searchlights.

When she laid the alethiometer bare, it was Farder Coram who spoke first.

"I never thought I'd ever set eyes on one of them again. That's a symbol reader. Did he tell you anything about it, child?"

"No. Only that I'd have to work out how to read it by myself. And he called it an alethiometer."

"What's that mean?" said John Faa, turning to his companion.

"That's a Greek word. I reckon it's from aktheia, which means truth. It's a truth measure. And have you worked out how to use it?" he said to her.

"No. Least, I can make the three short hands point to different pictures, but I can't do anything with the long one. It goes all over. Except sometimes, right, sometimes when I'm sort of concentrating, I can make the long needle go this way or that just by thinking it."

"What's it do, Farder Coram?" said John Faa. "And how do you read it?"

"All these pictures round the rim," said Farder Coram, holding it delicately toward John Faa's blunt strong gaze, "they're symbols, and each one stands for a whole series of things. Take the anchor, there. The first meaning of that is hope,

because hope holds you fast like an anchor so you don't give way. The second meaning is steadfastness. The third meaning is snag, or prevention. The fourth meaning is the sea. And so on, down to ten, twelve, maybe a never-ending series of meanings."

"And do you know them all?"

"I know some, but to read it fully I'd need the book. I seen the book and I know where it is, but I en't got it."

"We'll come back to that," said John Faa. "Go on with how you read it."

"You got three hands you can control," Farder Coram explained, "and you use them to ask a question. By pointing to three symbols you can ask any question you can imagine, because you've got so many levels of each one. Once you got your question framed, the other needle swings round and points to more symbols that give you the answer."

"But how does it know what level you're a thinking of when you set the question?" said John Faa.

"Ah, by itself it don't. It only works if the questioner holds the levels in their mind. You got to know all the meanings, first, and there must be a thousand or more. Then you got to be able to hold 'em in your mind without fretting at it or pushing for an answer, and just watch while the needle wanders. When it's gone round its full range, you'll know what the answer is. I know how it works because I seen it done once by a wise man in Uppsala, and that's the only time I ever saw one before. Do you know how rare these are?"

"The Master told me there was only six made," Lyra said.

"Whatever the number, it en't large."

"And you kept this secret from Mrs. Coulter, like the Master told you?" said John Faa.

"Yes. But her daemon, right, he used to go in my room. And I'm sure he found it."

"I see. Well, Lyra, I don't know if we'll ever understand the full truth, but this is my guess, as good as I can make it. The Master was given a charge by Lord Asriel to look after you and keep you safe from your mother. And that was what he

did, for ten years or more. Then Mrs. Coulter's friends in the Church helped her set up this Oblation Board, for what purpose we don't know, and there she was, as powerful in her way as Lord Asriel was in his. Your parents, both strong in the world, both ambitious, and the Master of Jordan holding you in the balance between them.

"Now the Master's got a hundred things to look after. His first concern is his College and the scholarship there. So if he sees a threat to that, he has to move agin it. And the Church in recent times, Lyra, it's been a getting more commanding. There's councils for this and councils for that; there's talk of reviving the Office of Inquisition, God forbid. And the Master has to tread warily between all these powers. He has to keep Jordan College on the right side of the Church, or it won't survive.

"And another concern of the Master is you, child. Bernie Johansen was always clear about that. The Master of Jordan and the other Scholars, they loved you like their own child. They'd do anything to keep you safe, not just because they'd promised to Lord Asriel that they would, but for your own

sake. So if the Master gave you up to Mrs. Coulter when he'd promised Lord Asriel he wouldn't, he must have thought you'd be safer with her than in Jordan College, in spite of all appearances. And when he set out to poison Lord Asriel, he must have thought that what Lord Asriel was a doing would place all of them in danger, and maybe all of us, too; maybe all the world. I see the Master as a man having terrible choices to make; whatever he chooses will do harm, but maybe if he does the right thing, a little less harm will come about than if he chooses wrong. God preserve me from having to make that sort of choice.

"And when it come to the point where he had to let you go, he gave you the symbol reader and bade you keep it safe. I wonder what he had in mind for you to do with it; as you couldn't read it, I'm foxed as to what he was a thinking."

"He said Uncle Asriel presented the alethiometer to Jordan College years before," Lyra said, struggling to remember. "He was going to say something else, and then someone knocked at the door and he had to stop. What I thought was, he might have wanted me to keep it away from Lord Asriel too."

"Or even the opposite," said John Faa.

"What d'you mean, John?" said Farder Coram.

"He might have had it in mind to ask Lyra to return it to Lord Asriel, as a kind of recompense for trying to poison him. He might have thought the danger from Lord Asriel had passed. Or that Lord Asriel could read some wisdom from this instrument and hold back from his purpose. If Lord Asriel's held captive now, it might help set him free. Well, Lyra, you better take this symbol reader and keep it safe. If you kept it safe so far, I en't worried about leaving it with you. But there might come a time when we need to consult it, and I reckon we'll ask for it then."

He folded the velvet over it and slid it back across the table. Lyra wanted to ask all kinds of questions, but suddenly she felt shy of this massive man, with his little eyes so sharp and kindly among their folds and wrinkles.

One thing she had to ask, though.

"Who was the gyptian woman who nursed me?"

"Why, it was Billy Costa's mother, of course. She won't have told you, because I en't let her, but she

knows what we're a talking of here, so it's all out in the open.

"Now you best be getting back to her. You got plenty to be a thinking of, child. When three days is gone past, we'll have another roping and discuss all there is to do. You be a good girl. Goodnight, Lyra."

"Goodnight, Lord Faa. Goodnight, Farder Coram," she said politely, clutching the alethiometer to her breast with one hand and scooping up Pantalaimon with the other. Both old men smiled kindly at her. Outside the door of the parley room Ma Costa was waiting, and as if nothing had happened since Lyra was born, the boat mother gathered her into her great arms and kissed her before bearing her off to bed.