

## **Five**

### **THE COCKTAIL PARTY**

In the days that followed, Lyra went everywhere with Mrs. Coulter, almost as if she were a daemon herself. Mrs. Coulter knew a great many people, and they met in all kinds of different places: in the morning there might be a meeting of geographers at the Royal Arctic Institute, and Lyra would sit by and listen; and then Mrs. Coulter might meet a politician or a cleric for lunch in a smart restaurant, and they would be very taken with Lyra and order special dishes for her, and she would learn how to eat asparagus or what sweetbreads tasted like. And then in the afternoon there might be more shopping, for Mrs. Coulter was preparing her expedition, and there were furs and oilskins and waterproof boots to buy, as well as sleeping bags and knives and drawing instruments that delighted Lyra's heart. After that they might go to tea and meet some ladies, as well dressed as Mrs. Coulter if not so beautiful or accomplished: women so unlike female Scholars or gyptian boat mothers or college servants as almost to be a new sex altogether, one with dangerous powers and qualities such as

elegance, charm, and grace. Lyra would be dressed up prettily for these occasions, and the ladies would pamper her and include her in their graceful delicate talk, which was all about people: this artist, or that politician, or those lovers.

And when the evening came, Mrs. Coulter might take Lyra to the theater, and again there would be lots of glamorous people to talk to and be admired by, for it seemed that Mrs. Coulter knew everyone important in London.

In the intervals between all these other activities Mrs. Coulter would teach her the rudiments of geography and mathematics. Lyra's knowledge had great gaps in it, like a map of the world largely eaten by mice, for at Jordan they had taught her in a piecemeal and disconnected way: a junior Scholar would be detailed to catch her and instruct her in such-and-such, and the lessons would continue for a sullen week or so until she "forgot"

to turn up, to the Scholar's relief. Or else a Scholar would forget what he was supposed to teach her, and drill her at great length about the subject of his current research, whatever that happened to be. It was no wonder her knowledge was patchy.

She knew about atoms and elementary particles, and anbaromagnetic charges and the four fundamental forces and other bits and pieces of experimental theology, but nothing about the solar system. In fact, when Mrs. Coulter realized this and explained how the earth and the other five planets revolved around the sun, Lyra laughed loudly at the joke. However, she was keen to show that she did know some things, and when Mrs. Coulter was telling her about electrons, she said expertly, "Yes, they're negatively charged particles. Sort of like Dust, except that Dust isn't charged."

As soon as she said that, Mrs. Coulter's daemon snapped his head up to look at her, and all the golden fur on his little body stood up, bristling, as if it were charged itself. Mrs. Coulter laid a hand on his back.

"Dust?" she said. "Yeah. You know, from space, that Dust."

"What do you know about Dust, Lyra?"

"Oh, that it comes out of space, and it lights people up, if you have a special sort of camera to see it by. Except not children. It doesn't affect children."

"Where did you learn that from?"

By now Lyra was aware that there was a powerful tension in the room, because Pantalaimon had crept ermine-like onto her lap and was trembling violently.

"Just someone in Jordan," Lyra said vaguely. "I forget who. I think it was one of the Scholars."

"Was it in one of your lessons?"

"Yes, it might have been. Or else it might've been just in passing. Yes. I think that was it. This Scholar, I think he was from New Denmark, he was talking to the Chaplain about Dust and I was just passing and it sounded interesting so I couldn't help stopping to listen. That's what it was."

"I see," said Mrs. Coulter.

"Is it right, what he told me? Did I get it wrong?"

"Well, I don't know. I'm sure you know much more than I do. Let's get back to those electrons...."

Later, Pantalaimon said, "You know when all the fur stood up on her daemon? Well, I was behind him, and she grabbed his fur so tight her knuckles went white. You couldn't see. It was a long time till his

fur went down. I thought he was going to leap at you."

That was strange, no doubt; but neither of them knew what to make of it. And finally, there were other kinds of lessons so gently and subtly given that they didn't feel like lessons at all. How to wash one's own hair; how to judge which colors suited one; how to say no in such a charming way that no offense was given; how to put on lipstick, powder, scent. To be sure, Mrs. Coulter didn't teach Lyra the latter arts directly, but she knew Lyra was watching when she made herself up, and she took care to let Lyra see where she kept the cosmetics, and to allow her time on her own to explore and try them out for herself.

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Time passed, and autumn began to change into winter. From time to time Lyra thought of Jordan College, but it seemed small and quiet compared to the busy life she led now. Every so often she thought of Roger, too, and felt uneasy, but there was an opera to go to, or a new dress to wear, or the Royal Arctic Institute to visit, and then she forgot him again.

When Lyra had been living there for six weeks or so, Mrs. Coulter decided to hold a cocktail party. Lyra had the impression that there was something to celebrate, though Mrs. Coulter never said what it was. She ordered flowers, she discussed canapes and drinks with the caterer, and she spent a whole evening with Lyra deciding whom to invite.

"We must have the archbishop. I couldn't afford to leave him out, though he's the most hateful old snob. Lord Boreal is in town: he'll be fun. And the Princess Postnikova. Do you think it would be right to invite Erik Andersson? I wonder if it's about time to take him up...."

Erik Andersson was the latest fashionable dancer. Lyra had no idea what "take him up" meant, but she enjoyed giving her opinion nonetheless. She dutifully wrote down all the names Mrs. Coulter suggested, spelling them atrociously and then crossing them out when Mrs. Coulter decided against them after all.

When Lyra went to bed, Pantalaimon whispered from the pillow:

"She's never going to the North! She's going to keep us here forever. When are we going to run away?"

"She is," Lyra whispered back. "You just don't like her. Well, that's hard luck. I like her. And why would she be teaching us navigation and all that if she wasn't going to take us north?"

"To stop you getting impatient, that's why. You don't really want to stand around at the cocktail party being all sweet and pretty. She's just making a pet out of you."

Lyra turned her back and closed her eyes. But what Pantalaimon said was true. She had been feeling confined and cramped by this polite life, however luxurious it was. She would have given anything for a day with Roger and her Oxford ragamuffin friends, with a battle in the claybeds and a race along the canal. The one thing that kept her polite and attentive to Mrs. Coulter was that tantalizing hope of going north. Perhaps they would meet Lord Asriel. Perhaps he and Mrs. Coulter would fall in love, and they would get married and adopt Lyra, and go and rescue Roger from the Gobblers.

On the afternoon of the cocktail party, Mrs. Coulter took Lyra to a fashionable hairdresser's, where her stiff dark blond hair was softened and waved, and her nails were filed and polished, and where they even applied a little makeup to her eyes and lips to show her how to do it. Then they went to collect the new dress Mrs. Coulter had ordered for her, and to buy some patent-leather shoes, and then it was time to go back to the flat and check the flowers and get dressed.

"Not the shoulder bag, dear," said Mrs. Coulter as Lyra came out of her bedroom, glowing with a sense of her own prettiness.

Lyra had taken to wearing a little white leather shoulder bag everywhere, so as to keep the alethiometer close at hand. Mrs. Coulter, loosening the cramped way some roses had been bunched into a vase, saw that Lyra wasn't moving and glanced pointedly at the door.

"Oh, please, Mrs. Coulter, I do love this bag!"

"Not indoors, Lyra. It looks absurd to be carrying a shoulder bag in your own home. Take it off at once, and come and help check these glasses...."



It wasn't so much her snappish tone as the words "in your own home" that made Lyra resist stubbornly. Pantalaimon flew to the floor and instantly became a polecat, arching his back against her little white ankle socks. Encouraged by this, Lyra said:

"But it won't be in the way. And it's the only thing I really like wearing. I think it really suits—"

She didn't finish the sentence, because Mrs. Coulter's daemon sprang off the sofa in a blur of golden fur and pinned Pantalaimon to the carpet before he could move. Lyra cried out in alarm, and then in fear and pain, as Pantalaimon twisted this way and that, shrieking and snarling, unable to loosen the golden monkey's grip. Only a few seconds, and the monkey had overmastered him: with one fierce black paw around his throat and his black paws gripping the polecat's lower limbs, he took one of Pantalaimon's ears in his other paw and pulled as if he intended to tear it off. Not angrily, either, but with a cold curious force that was horrifying to see and even worse to feel.

Lyra sobbed in terror.

"Don't! Please! Stop hurting us!"

Mrs. Coulter looked up from her flowers.

"Do as I tell you, then," she said.

"I promise!"

The golden monkey stepped away from Pantalaimon as if he were suddenly bored.

Pantalaimon fled to Lyra at once, and she scooped him up to her face to kiss and gentle.

"Now, Lyra," said Mrs. Coulter. Lyra turned her back abruptly and slammed into her bedroom, but no sooner had she banged the door shut behind her than it opened again. Mrs. Coulter was standing there only a foot or two away.

"Lyra, if you behave in this coarse and vulgar way, we shall have a confrontation, which I will win. Take off that bag this instant. Control that unpleasant frown. Never slam a door again in my hearing or out of it. Now, the first guests will be arriving in a few minutes, and they are going to find you perfectly behaved, sweet, charming, innocent, attentive, delightful in every way. I particularly wish for that, Lyra, do you understand me?"

"Yes, Mrs. Coulter."

"Then kiss me."

She bent a little and offered her cheek. Lyra had to stand on tiptoe to kiss it. She noticed how smooth it was, and the slight perplexing smell of Mrs. Coulter's flesh: scented, but somehow metallic. She drew away and laid the shoulder bag on her dressing table before following Mrs. Coulter back to the drawing room.

"What do you think of the flowers, dear?" said Mrs. Coulter as sweetly as if nothing had happened. "I suppose one can't go wrong with roses, but you can have too much of a good thing....Have the caterers brought enough ice? Be a dear and go and ask. Warm drinks are horrid..."

Lyra found it was quite easy to pretend to be lighthearted and charming, though she was conscious every second of Pantalaimon's disgust, and of his hatred for the golden monkey. Presently the doorbell rang, and soon the room was filling up with fashionably dressed ladies and handsome or distinguished men. Lyra moved among them offering canapes or smiling sweetly and making pretty answers when they spoke to her. She felt like a universal pet, and the second she voiced that

thought to herself, Pantalaimon stretched his goldfinch wings and chirruped loudly.

She sensed his glee at having proved her right, and became a little more retiring.

"And where do you go to school, my dear?" said an elderly lady, inspecting Lyra through a lorgnette.

"I don't go to school," Lyra told her.

"Really? I thought your mother would have sent you to her old school. A very good place..."

Lyra was mystified until she realized the old lady's mistake.

"Oh! She's not my mother! I'm just here helping her. I'm her personal assistant," she said importantly.

"I see. And who are your people?"

Again Lyra had to wonder what she meant before replying.

"They were a count and countess," she said. "They both died in an aeronautical accident in the North."

"Which count?"

"Count Belacqua. He was Lord Asriel's brother."

The old lady's daemon, a scarlet macaw, shifted as if in irritation from one foot to another. The old lady was beginning to frown with curiosity, so Lyra smiled sweetly and moved on.

She was going past a group of men and one young woman near the large sofa when she heard the word Dust. She had seen enough of society now to understand when men and women were flirting, and she watched the process with fascination, though she was more fascinated by the mention of Dust, and she hung back to listen. The men seemed to be Scholars; from the way the young woman was questioning them, Lyra took her to be a student of some kind.

"It was discovered by a Muscovite—stop me if you know this already—" a middle-aged man was saying, as the young woman gazed at him in admiration, "a man called Rusakov, and they're usually called Rusakov Particles after him. Elementary particles that don't interact in any way with others—very hard to detect, but the extraordinary thing is that they seem to be attracted to human beings."

"Really?" said the young woman, wide-eyed.

"And even more extraordinary," he went on, "some human beings more than others. Adults attract it, but not children. At least, not much, and not until adolescence. In fact, that's the very reason—" His voice dropped, and he moved closer to the young woman, putting his hand confidentially on her shoulder. "—that's the very reason the Oblation Board was set up. As our good hostess here could tell you."

"Really? Is she involved with the Oblation Board?"

"My dear, she is the Oblation Board. It's entirely her own project—"

The man was about to tell her more when he caught sight of Lyra. She stared back at him unblinkingly, and perhaps he had had a little too much to drink, or perhaps he was keen to impress the young woman, for he said:

"This little lady knows all about it, I'll be bound. You're safe from the Oblation Board, aren't you, my dear?"

"Oh, yes," said Lyra. "I'm safe from everyone here. Where I used to live, in Oxford, there was all kinds of dangerous things. There was gyptians—they

take kids and sell 'em to the Turks for slaves. And on Port Meadow at the full moon there's a werewolf that comes out from the old nunnery at Godstow. I heard him howling once. And there's the Gobblers...."

"That's what I mean," the man said. "That's what they call the Oblation Board, don't they?"

Lyra felt Pantalaimon tremble suddenly, but he was on his best behavior. The daemons of the two grownups, a cat and a butterfly, didn't seem to notice.

"Gobblers?" said the young woman. "What a peculiar name! Why do they call them Gobblers?"

Lyra was about to tell her one of the bloodcurdling stories she'd made up to frighten the Oxford kids with, but the man was already speaking.

"From the initials, d'you see? General Oblation Board. Very old idea, as a matter of fact. In the Middle Ages, parents would give their children to the church to be monks or nuns. And the unfortunate brats were known as oblates. Means a sacrifice, an offering, something of that sort. So the same idea was taken up when they were looking

into the Dust business....As our little friend probably knows. Why don't you go and talk to Lord Boreal?" he added to Lyra directly. "I'm sure he'd like to meet Mrs. Coulter's protegee....That's him, the man with gray hair and the serpent daemon."

He wanted to get rid of Lyra so that he could talk more privately with the young woman; Lyra could tell that easily. But the young woman, it seemed, was still interested in Lyra, and slipped away from the man to talk to her.

"Stop a minute....What's your name?"

"Lyra."

"I'm Adele Starminster. I'm a journalist. Could I have a quiet word?"

Thinking it only natural that people should wish to talk to her, Lyra said simply, "Yes."

The woman's butterfly daemon rose into the air, casting about to left and right, and fluttered down to whisper something, at which Adele Starminster said, "Come to the window seat."

This was a favorite spot of Lyra's; it overlooked the river, and at this time of night, the lights across on



the south bank were glittering brilliantly over their reflections in the black water of the high tide. A line of barges hauled by a tug moved upriver. Adele Starminster sat down and moved along the cushioned seat to make room.

"Did Professor Docker say that you had some connection with Mrs. Coulter?"

"Yes."

"What is it? You're not her daughter, by any chance? I suppose I should know—"

"No!" said Lyra. "'Course not. I'm her personal assistant."

"Her personal assistant? You're a bit young, aren't you? I thought you were related to her or something. What's she like?"

"She's very clever," said Lyra. Before this evening she would have said much more, but things were changing.

"Yes, but personally," Adele Starminster insisted. "I mean, is she friendly or impatient or what? Do you live here with her? What's she like in private?"

"She's very nice," said Lyra stolidly.

"What sort of things do you do? How do you help her?"

"I do calculations and all that. Like for navigation."

"Ah, I see....And where do you come from? What was your name again?"

"Lyra. I come from Oxford."

"Why did Mrs. Coulter pick you to—"

She stopped very suddenly, because Mrs. Coulter herself had appeared close by. From the way Adele Starminster looked up at her, and the agitated way her daemon was fluttering around her head, Lyra could tell that the young woman wasn't supposed to be at the party at all.

"I don't know your name," said Mrs. Coulter very quietly, "but I shall find it out within five minutes, and then you will never work as a journalist again. Now get up very quietly, without making a fuss, and leave. I might add that whoever brought you here will also suffer."

Mrs. Coulter seemed to be charged with some kind of anbaric force. She even smelled different: a hot smell, like heated metal, came off her body. Lyra had felt something of it earlier, but now she

was seeing it directed at someone else, and poor Adele Starminster had no force to resist. Her daemon fell limp on her shoulder and flapped his gorgeous wings once or twice before fainting, and the woman herself seemed to be unable to stand fully upright. Moving in a slight awkward crouch, she made her way through the press of loudly talking guests and out of the drawing room door. She had one hand clutched to her shoulder, holding the swooning daemon in place.

"Well?" said Mrs. Coulter to Lyra.

"I never told her anything important," Lyra said.

"What was she asking?"

"Just about what I was doing and who I was, and stuff like that."

As she said that, Lyra noticed that Mrs. Coulter was alone, without her daemon. How could that be? But a moment later the golden monkey appeared at her side, and, reaching down, she took his hand and swung him up lightly to her shoulder. At once she seemed at ease again.

"If you come across anyone else who obviously hasn't been invited, dear, do come and find me, won't you?"

The hot metallic smell was vanishing. Perhaps Lyra had only imagined it. She could smell Mrs.

Coulter's scent again, and the roses, and the cigarillo smoke, and the scent of other women.

Mrs. Coulter smiled at Lyra in a way that seemed to say, "You and I understand these things, don't we?" and moved on to greet some other guests.

Pantalaimon was whispering in Lyra's ear.

"While she was here, her daemon was coming out of our bedroom. He's been spying. He knows about the alethiometer!"

Lyra felt that that was probably true, but there was nothing she could do about it. What had that professor been saying about the Gobblers? She looked around to find him again, but no sooner had she seen him than the commissioner (in servant's dress for the evening) and another man tapped the professor on the shoulder and spoke quietly to him, at which he turned pale and followed them out. That took no more than a couple of seconds, and it was so discreetly done

that hardly anyone noticed. But it left Lyra feeling anxious and exposed.

She wandered through the two big rooms where the party was taking place, half-listening to the conversations around her, half-interested in the taste of the cocktails she wasn't allowed to try, and increasingly fretful. She wasn't aware that anyone was watching her until the commissionaire appeared at her side and bent to say:

"Miss Lyra, the gentleman by the fireplace would like to speak to you. He's Lord Boreal, if you didn't know."

Lyra looked up across the room. The powerful-looking gray-haired man was looking directly at her, and as their eyes met, he nodded and beckoned. Unwilling, but more interested now, she went across.

"Good evening, child," he said. His voice was smooth and commanding. His serpent daemon's mailed head and emerald eyes glittered in the light from the cut-glass lamp on the wall nearby.

"Good evening," said Lyra.

"How is my old friend the Master of Jordan?"

"Very well, thank you."

"I expect they were all sorry to say goodbye to you."

"Yes, they were."

"And is Mrs. Coulter keeping you busy? What is she teaching you?"

Because Lyra was feeling rebellious and uneasy, she didn't answer this patronizing question with the truth, or with one of her usual flights of fancy. Instead she said, "I'm learning about Rusakov Particles, and about the Oblation Board."

He seemed to become focused at once, in the same way that you could focus the beam of an anbaric lantern. All his attention streamed at her fiercely.

"Suppose you tell me what you know," he said.

"They're doing experiments in the North," Lyra said. She was feeling reckless now.

"Like Dr. Grumman."

"Go on."

"They've got this special kind of photogram where you can see Dust, and when you see a man, there's

like all light coming to him, and there's none on a child. At least, not so much."

"Did Mrs. Coulter show you a picture like that?"

Lyra hesitated, for this was not lying but something else, and she wasn't practiced at it.

"No," she said after a moment. "I saw that one at Jordan College."

"Who showed it to you?"

"He wasn't really showing it to me," Lyra admitted. "I was just passing and I saw it. And then my friend Roger was taken by the Oblation Board. But—"

"Who showed you that picture?"

"My Uncle Asriel."

"When?"

"When he was in Jordan College last time."

"I see. And what else have you been learning about? Did I hear you mention the Oblation Board?"

"Yes. But I didn't hear about that from him, I heard it here."

Which was exactly true, she thought.

He was looking at her narrowly. She gazed back with all the innocence she had. Finally he nodded.

"Then Mrs. Coulter must have decided you were ready to help her in that work. Interesting. Have you taken part yet?"

"No," said Lyra. What was he talking about?

Pantalaimon was cleverly in his most inexpressive shape, a moth, and couldn't betray her feelings; and she was sure she could keep her own face innocent.

"And has she told you what happens to the children?"

"No, she hasn't told me that. I only just know that it's about Dust, and they're like a kind of sacrifice."

Again, that wasn't exactly a lie, she thought; she had never said that Mrs. Coulter herself had told her.

"Sacrifice is rather a dramatic way of putting it. What's done is for their good as well as ours. And of course they all come to Mrs. Coulter willingly. That's why she's so valuable. They must want to take part, and what child could resist her? And if



she's going to use you as well to bring them in, so much the better. I'm very pleased."

He smiled at her in the way Mrs. Coulter had: as if they were both in on a secret. She smiled politely back and he turned away to talk to someone else. She and Pantalaimon could sense each other's horror. She wanted to go away by herself and talk to him; she wanted to leave the flat; she wanted to go back to Jordan College and her little shabby bedroom on Staircase Twelve; she wanted to find Lord Asriel— And as if in answer to that last wish, she heard his name mentioned, and wandered closer to the group talking nearby with the pretext of helping herself to a canape from the plate on the table. A man in a bishop's purple was saying: "...No, I don't think Lord Asriel will be troubling us for quite some time."

"And where did you say he was being held?"

"In the fortress of Svalbard, I'm told. Guarded by panser-bj0rne—you know, armored bears. Formidable creatures! He won't escape from them if he lives to be a thousand. The fact is that I really think the way is clear, very nearly clear—"

"The last experiments have confirmed what I always believed—that Dust is an emanation from the dark principle itself, and—"

"Do I detect the Zoroastrian heresy?"

"What used to be a heresy—"

"And if we could isolate the dark principle—"

"Svalbard, did you say?"

"Armored bears—"

"The Oblation Board—"

"The children don't suffer, I'm sure of it—"

"Lord Asriel imprisoned—"

Lyra had heard enough. She turned away, and moving as quietly as the moth Pantalaimon, she went into her bedroom and closed the door. The noise of the party was muffled at once.

"Well?" she whispered, and he became a goldfinch on her shoulder.

"Are we going to run away?" he whispered back.

"Course. If we do it now with all these people about, she might not notice for a while."

"He will."

Pantalaimon meant Mrs. Coulter's daemon. When Lyra thought of his lithe golden shape, she felt ill with fear.

"I'll fight him this time," Pantalaimon said boldly. "I can change and he can't. I'll change so quickly he won't be able to keep hold. This time I'll win, you'll see."

Lyra nodded distractedly. What should she wear? How could she get out without being seen?

"You'll have to go and spy," she whispered. "As soon as it's clear, we'll have to run. Be a moth," she added. "Remember, the second there's no one looking..."

She opened the door a crack and he crawled out, dark against the warm pink light in the corridor.

Meanwhile, she hastily flung on the warmest clothes she had and stuffed some more into one of the coal-silk bags from the fashionable shop they'd visited that very afternoon. Mrs. Coulter had given her money like sweets, and although she had spent it lavishly, there were still several sovereigns left, which she put in the pocket of the dark wolfskin coat before tiptoeing to the door.

Last of all she packed the alethiometer in its black velvet cloth. Had that abominable monkey found it? He must have done; he must have told her; oh, if she'd only hidden it better!

She tiptoed to the door. Her room opened into the end of the corridor nearest the hall, luckily, and most of the guests were in the two big rooms further along. There was the sound of voices talking loudly, laughter, the quiet flushing of a lavatory, the tinkle of glasses; and then a tiny moth voice at her ear said:

“Now! Quick!”

She slipped through the door and into the hall, and in less than three seconds she was opening the front door of the flat. A moment after that she was through and pulling it quietly shut, and with Pantalaimon a goldfinch again, she ran for the stairs and fled.