

TWENTY-TWO

BETRAYAL

She woke to find a stranger shaking her arm, and then as Pantalaimon sprang awake and growled, she recognized Thorold. He was holding a naphtha lamp, and his hand was trembling.

"Miss—miss—get up quickly. I don't know what to do. He's left no orders. I think he's mad, miss."

"What? What's happening?"

"Lord Asriel, miss. He's been almost in a delirium since you went to bed. I've never seen him so wild. He packed a lot of instruments and batteries in a sledge and he harnessed up the dogs and left. But he's got the boy, miss!"

"Roger? He's taken Roger?"

"He told me to wake him and dress him, and I didn't think to argue—I never have—the boy kept on asking for you, miss—but Lord Asriel wanted him alone—you know when you first came to the door, miss? And he saw you and couldn't believe his eyes, and wanted you gone?"

Lyra's head was in such a whirl of weariness and fear that she could hardly think, but

"Yes? Yes?" she said.

"It was because he needed a child to finish his experiment, miss! And Lord Asriel has a way special to himself of bringing about what he wants, he just has to call for something and—"

Now Lyra's head was full of a roar, as if she were trying to stifle some knowledge from her own consciousness. She had got out of bed, and was reaching for her clothes, and then she suddenly collapsed, and a fierce cry of despair enveloped her. She was uttering it, but it was bigger than she was; it felt as if the despair were uttering her. For she remembered his words: the energy that links body and daemon is immensely powerful; and to bridge the gap between worlds needed a phenomenal burst of energy....

She had just realized what she'd done.

She had struggled all this way to bring something to Lord Asriel, thinking she knew what he wanted; and it wasn't the alethiometer at all. What he wanted was a child.

She had brought him Roger.

That was why he'd cried out, "I did not send for you!" when he saw her; he had sent for a child, and the fates had brought him his own daughter. Or so he'd thought, until she'd stepped aside and shown him Roger.

Oh, the bitter anguish! She had thought she was saving Roger, and all the time she'd been diligently working to betray him....

Lyra shook and sobbed in a frenzy of emotion. It couldn't be true.

Thorold tried to comfort her, but he didn't know the reason for her extremity of grief, and could only pat her shoulder nervously.

"lorek—" she sobbed, pushing the servant aside. "Where's lorek Byrnison? The bear? Is he still outside?"

The old man shrugged helplessly.

"Help me!" she said, trembling all over with weakness and fear. "Help me dress. I got to go. Now.¹ Do it quick!"

He put the lamp down and did as she told him. When she commanded, in that imperious way, she was very like her father, for all that her face was wet with tears and her lips trembling. While Pantalaimon paced the floor lashing his tail, his fur almost sparking, Thorold hastened to bring her stiff, reeking furs and help her into them. As soon as all the buttons were done up and all the flaps secured, she made for the door, and felt the cold strike her throat like a sword and freeze the tears at once on her cheeks.

"Iorek!" she called. "Iorek Byrnison! Come, because I need you!"

There was a shake of snow, a clank of metal, and the bear was there. He had been sleeping calmly under the falling snow. In the light spilling from the lamp Thorold was holding at the window, Lyra saw the long faceless head, the narrow eye slits, the gleam of white fur below red-black metal, and wanted to embrace him and seek some comfort from his iron helmet, his ice-tipped fur.

"Well?" he said.

"We got to catch Lord Asriel. He's taken Roger and he's a going to—I daren't think—oh, lorek, I beg you, go quick, my dear!"

"Come then," he said, and she leaped on his back. There was no need to ask which way to go: the tracks of the sledge led straight out from the courtyard and over the plain, and lorek leaped forward to follow them. His motion was now so much a part of Lyra's being that to sit balanced was entirely automatic. He ran over the thick snowy mantle on the rocky ground faster than he'd ever done, and the armor plates shifted under her in a regular swinging rhythm.

Behind them, the other bears paced easily, pulling the fire hurler with them. The way was clear, for the moon was high and the light it cast over the snowbound world was as bright as it had been in the balloon: a world of bright silver and profound black. The tracks of Lord Asriel's sledge ran straight toward a range of jagged hills, strange stark pointed shapes jutting up into a sky as black as the alethiometer's velvet cloth. There was no sign of the sledge itself—or was there a feather touch of movement on the flank of the highest peak? Lyra

peered ahead, straining her eyes, and Pantalaimon flew as high as he could and looked with an owl's clear vision.

"Yes," he said, on her wrist a moment later; "it's Lord Asriel, and he's lashing his dogs on furiously, and there's a boy in the back...."

Lyra felt Iorek Byrnison change pace. Something had caught his attention. He was slowing and lifting his head to cast left and right.

"What is it?" Lyra said. He didn't say. He was listening intently, but she could hear nothing. Then she did hear something: a mysterious, vastly distant rustling and crackling. It was a sound she had heard before: the sound of the Aurora. Out of nowhere a veil of radiance had fallen to hang shimmering in the northern sky. All those unseen billions and trillions of charged particles, and possibly, she thought, of Dust, conjured a radiating glow out of the upper atmosphere. This was going to be a display more brilliant and extraordinary than any Lyra had yet seen, as if the Aurora knew the drama that was taking place below, and wanted to light it with the most awe-inspiring effects.

But none of the bears were looking up: their attention was all on the earth. It wasn't the Aurora, after all, that had caught lorek's attention. He was standing stock-still now, and Lyra slipped off his back, knowing that his senses needed to cast around freely. Something was troubling him.

Lyra looked around, back across the vast open plain leading to Lord Asriel's house, back toward the tumbled mountains they'd crossed earlier, and saw nothing. The Aurora grew more intense. The first veils trembled and raced to one side, and jagged curtains folded and unfolded above, increasing in size and brilliance every minute; arcs and loops swirled across from horizon to horizon, and touched the very zenith with bows of radiance. She could hear more clearly than ever the immense singing hiss and swish of vast intangible forces.

"Witches!" came a cry in a bear voice, and Lyra turned in joy and relief. But a heavy muzzle knocked her forward, and with no breath left to gasp she could only pant and shudder, for there in the place where she had been standing was the plume of a green-feathered arrow. The head and the shaft were buried in the snow. Impossible.! she

thought weakly, but it was true, for another arrow clattered off the armor of Iorek, standing above her. These were not Serafina Pekkala's witches; they were from another clan. They circled above, a dozen of them or more, swooping down to shoot and soaring up again, and Lyra swore with every word she knew.

Iorek Byrnison gave swift orders. It was clear that the bears were practiced at witch fighting, for they had moved at once into a defensive formation, and the witches moved just as smoothly into attack. They could only shoot accurately from close range, and in order not to waste arrows they would swoop down, fire at the lowest part of their dive, and turn upward at once. But when they reached the lowest point, and their hands were busy with bow and arrow, they were vulnerable, and the bears would explode upward with raking paws to drag them down. More than one fell, and was quickly dispatched. Lyra crouched low beside a rock, watching for a witch dive. A few shot at her, but the arrows fell wide; and then Lyra, looking up at the sky, saw the greater part of the witch flight peel off and turn back.

If she was relieved by that, her relief didn't last more than a few moments. Because from the direction in which they'd flown, she saw many others coming to join them; and in midair with them there was a group of gleaming lights; and across the broad expanse of the Svalbard plain, under the radiance of the Aurora, she heard a sound she dreaded. It was the harsh throb of a gas engine. The zeppelin, with Mrs. Coulter and her troops on board, was catching up.

Irek growled an order and the bears moved at once into another formation. In the lurid flicker from the sky Lyra watched as they swiftly unloaded their fire hurler. The advance guard of the witch flight had seen them too, and began to swoop downward and rain arrows on them, but for the most part the bears trusted to their armor and worked swiftly to erect the apparatus: a long arm extending upward at an angle, a cup or bowl a yard across, and a great iron tank wreathed in smoke and steam.

As she watched, a bright flame gushed out, and a team of bears swung into practiced action. Two of them hauled the long arm of the fire thrower

down, another scooped shovelfuls of fire into the bowl, and at an order they released it, to hurl the flaming sulfur high into the dark sky.

The witches were swooping so thickly above them that three fell in flames at the first shot alone, but it was soon clear that the real target was the zeppelin. The pilot either had never seen a fire hurler before, or was underestimating its power, for he flew straight on toward the bears without climbing or turning a fraction to either side.

Then it became clear that they had a powerful weapon in the zeppelin too: a machine rifle mounted on the nose of the gondola. Lyra saw sparks flying up from some of the bears' armor, and saw them huddle over beneath its protection, before she heard the rattle of the bullets. She cried out in fear. "They're safe," said Iorek Byrnison. "Can't pierce armor with little bullets."

The fire thrower worked again: this time a mass of blazing sulfur hurtled directly upward to strike the gondola and burst in a cascade of flaming fragments on all sides. The zeppelin banked to the left, and roared away in a wide arc before making again for the group of bears working swiftly beside

the apparatus. As it neared, the arm of the fire thrower creaked downward; the machine rifle coughed and spat, and two bears fell, to a low growl from Iorek Byrnison; and when the aircraft was nearly overhead, a bear shouted an order, and the spring-loaded arm shot upward again.

This time the sulfur hurtled against the envelope of the zeppelin's gas bag. The rigid frame held a skin of oiled silk in place to contain the hydrogen, and although this was tough enough to withstand minor scratches, a hundredweight of blazing rock was too much for it. The silk ripped straight through, and sulfur and hydrogen leaped to meet each other in a catastrophe of flame.

At once the silk became transparent; the entire skeleton of the zeppelin was visible, dark against an inferno of orange and red and yellow, hanging in the air for what seemed like an impossibly long time before drifting to the ground almost reluctantly. Little figures black against the snow and the fire came tottering or running from it, and witches flew down to help drag them away from the flames. Within a minute of the zeppelin's

hitting the ground it was a mass of twisted metal, a pall of smoke, and a few scraps of fluttering fire.

But the soldiers on board, and the others too (though Lyra was too far away by now to spot Mrs. Coulter, she knew she was there), wasted no time. With the help of the witches they dragged the machine gun out and set it up, and began to fight in earnest on the ground.

"On," said Iorek. "They will hold out for a long time."

He roared, and a group of bears peeled away from the main group and attacked the Tartars' right flank. Lyra could feel his desire to be there among them, but all the time her nerves were screaming: On! On! and her mind was filled with pictures of Roger and Lord Asriel; and Iorek Byrnison knew, and turned up the mountain and away from the fight, leaving his bears to hold back the Tartars.

On they climbed. Lyra strained her eyes to look ahead, but not even Pantalaimon's owl eyes could see any movement on the flank of the mountain they were climbing. Lord Asriel's sledge tracks were clear, however, and Iorek followed them swiftly, loping through the snow and kicking it high behind

them as he ran. Whatever happened behind now was simply that: behind. Lyra had left it. She felt she was leaving the world altogether, so remote and intent she was, so high they were climbing, so strange and uncanny was the light that bathed them.

"lorek," she said, "will you find Lee Scoresby?"

"Alive or dead, I will find him."

"And if you see Serafina Pekkala..."

"I will tell her what you did."

"Thank you, lorek," she said. They spoke no more for some time. Lyra felt herself moving into a kind of trance beyond sleep and waking: a state of conscious dreaming, almost, in which she was dreaming that she was being carried by bears to a city in the stars.

She was going to say something about it to lorek Byrnison, when he slowed down and came to a halt.

"The tracks go on," said lorek Byrnison. "But I cannot."

Lyra jumped down and stood beside him to look. He was standing at the edge of a chasm. Whether it was a crevasse in the ice or a fissure in the rock was hard to say, and made little difference in any case; all that mattered was that it plunged downward into unfathomable gloom.

And the tracks of Lord Asriel's sledge ran to the brink... and on, across a bridge of compacted snow.

This bridge had clearly felt the strain of the sledge's weight, for a crack ran across it close to the other edge of the chasm, and the surface on the near side of the crack had settled down a foot or so. It might support the weight of a child: it would certainly not stand under the weight of an armored bear.

And Lord Asriel's tracks ran on beyond the bridge and further up the mountain. If she went on, it would have to be by herself.

Lyra turned to Iorek Byrnison.

"I got to go across," she said. "Thank you for all you done. I don't know what's going to happen when I get to him. We might all die, whether I get to him

or not. But if I come back, I'll come and see you to thank you properly, King Iorek Byrnison."

She laid a hand on his head. He let it lie there and nodded gently.

"Goodbye, Lyra Silvertongue," he said. Her heart thumping painfully with love, she turned away and set her foot on the bridge. The snow creaked under her, and Pantalaimon flew up and over the bridge, to settle in the snow on the far side and encourage her onward. Step after step she took, and wondered with every step whether it would be better to run swiftly and leap for the other side, or go slowly as she was doing and tread as lightly as possible. Halfway across there came another loud creak from the snow; a piece fell off near her feet and tumbled into the abyss, and the bridge settled down another few inches against the crack.

She stood perfectly still. Pantalaimon was crouched, leopard-formed, ready to leap down and reach for her.

The bridge held. She took another step, then another, and then she felt something settling down below her feet and leaped for the far side with all her strength. She landed belly- down in the snow

as the entire length of the bridge fell into the crevasse with a soft whoosh behind her.

Pantalaimon's claws were in her furs, holding tight.

After a minute she opened her eyes and crawled up away from the edge. There was no way back. She stood and raised her hand to the watching bear. Iorek Byrnison stood on his hind legs to acknowledge her, and then turned and made off down the mountain in a swift run to help his subjects in the battle with Mrs. Coulter and the soldiers from the zeppelin.

Lyra was alone.