

TWELVE

THE LOST BOY

They traveled for several hours and then stopped to eat. While the men were lighting fires and melting snow for water, with Iorek Byrnison watching Lee Scoresby roast seal meat close by, John Faa spoke to Lyra.

"Lyra, can you see that instrument to read it?" he said. The moon itself had long set. The light from the Aurora was brighter than moonlight, but it was inconstant. However, Lyra's eyes were keen, and she fumbled inside her furs and tugged out the black velvet bag.

"Yes, I can see all right," she said. "But I know where most of the symbols are by now anyway. What shall I ask it, Lord Faa?"

"I want to know more about how they're defending this place, Bolvangar," he said. Without even having to think about it, she found her fingers moving the hands to point to the helmet, the griffin, and the crucible, and felt her mind settle into the right meanings like a complicated diagram in three dimensions. At once the needle began to

swing round, back, round and on further, like a bee dancing its message to the hive. She watched it calmly, content not to know at first but to know that a meaning was coming, and then it began to clear. She let it dance on until it was certain.

"It's just like the witch's daemon said, Lord Faa. There's a company of Tartars guarding the station, and they got wires all round it. They don't really expect to be attacked, that's what the symbol reader says. But Lord Faa..."

"What, child?"

"It's a telling me something else. In the next valley there's a village by a lake where the folk are troubled by a ghost."

John Faa shook his head impatiently, and said, "That don't matter now. There's bound to be spirits of all kinds among these forests. Tell me again about them Tartars. How many, for instance? What are they armed with?"

Lyra dutifully asked, and reported the answer:

"There's sixty men with rifles, and they got a couple of larger guns, sort of cannons. They got fire

throwers too. And... Their daemons are all wolves, that's what it says."

That caused a stir among the older gyptians, those who'd campaigned before.

"The Sibirsk regiments have wolf daemons," said one. John Faa said, "I never met fiercer. We shall have to fight like tigers. And consult the bear; he's a shrewd warrior, that one."

Lyra was impatient, and said, "But Lord Faa, this ghost—I think it's the ghost of one of the kids!"

"Well, even if it is, Lyra, I don't know what anyone could do about it. Sixty Sibirsk riflemen, and fire throwers...Mr. Scoresby, step over here if you would, for a moment."

While the aeronaut came to the sledge, Lyra slipped away and spoke to the bear.

"Ilorek, have you traveled this way before?"

"Once," he said in that deep flat voice.

"There's a village near, en't there?"

"Over the ridge," he said, looking up through the sparse trees.

"Is it far?"

"For you or for me?"

"For me," she said.

"Too far. Not at all far for me."

"How long would it take you to get there, then?" "I could be there and back three times by next moonrise." "Because, lorek, listen: I got this symbol reader that tells me things, you see, and it's told me that there's something important I got to do over in that village, and Lord Faa won't let me go there. He just wants to get on quick, and I know that's important too. But unless I go and find out what it is, we might not know what the Gobblers are really doing."

The bear said nothing. He was sitting up like a human, his great paws folded in his lap, his dark eyes looking into hers down the length of his muzzle. He knew she wanted something.

Pantalaimon spoke: "Can you take us there and catch up with the sledges later on?"

"I could. But I have given my word to Lord Faa to obey him, not anyone else."

"If I got his permission?" said Lyra. "Then yes."

She turned and ran back through the snow. "Lord Faa! If lorek Byrnison takes me over the ridge to the village, we can find out whatever it is, and then catch the sledges up further on. He knows the route," she urged. "And I wouldn't ask, except it's like what I did before, Farder Coram, you remember, with that chameleon? I didn't understand it then, but it was true, and we found out soon after. I got the same feeling now. I can't understand properly what it's saying, only I know it's important. And lorek Byrnison knows the way, he says he could get there and back three times by next moonrise, and I couldn't be safer than I'd be with him, could I? But he won't go without he gets Lord Faa's permission."

There was a silence. Farder Coram sighed. John Faa was frowning, and his mouth inside the fur hood was set grimly. But before he could speak, the aeronaut put in:

"Lord Faa, if lorek Byrnison takes the little girl, she'll be as safe as if she was here with us. All bears are true, but I've known lorek for years, and nothing under the sky will make him break his word. Give him the charge to take care of her and he'll do it,

make no mistake. As for speed, he can lope for hours without tiring."

"But why should not some men go?" said John Faa.

"Well, they'd have to walk," Lyra pointed out, "because you couldn't run a sledge over that ridge. I can go faster than any man over that sort of country, and I'm light enough so's he won't be slowed down. And I promise, Lord Faa, I promise not to be any longer than I need, and not to give anything away about us, or to get in any danger."

"You're sure you need to do this? That symbol reader isn't playing the fool with you?"

"It never does, Lord Faa, and I don't think it could."

John Faa rubbed his chin.

"Well, if all comes out right, we'll have a piece more knowledge than we do now. I can go faster than any man over that sort of country," he called, "are you willing to do as this child bids?"

"I do your bidding, Lord Faa. Tell me to take the child there, and I will."

"Very well. You are to take her where she wishes to go and do as she bids. Lyra, I'm commanding you now, you understand?"

"Yes, Lord Faa."

"You go and search for whatever it is, and when you've found it, you turn right round and come back. Irek Byrnison, we'll be traveling on by that time, so you'll have to catch us up."

The bear nodded his great head. "Are there any soldiers in the village?" he said to Lyra.

"Will I need my armor? We shall be swifter without it." "No," she said. "I'm certain of that, Irek. Thank you, Lord Faa, and I promise I'll do just as you say."

Tony Costa gave her a strip of dried seal meat to chew, and with Pantalaimon as a mouse inside her hood, Lyra clambered onto the great bear's back, gripping his fur with her mittens and his narrow muscular back between her knees. His fur was wondrously thick, and the sense of immense power she felt was overwhelming. As if she weighed nothing at all, he turned and loped away in a long swinging run up toward the ridge and into the low trees.

It took some time before she was used to the movement, and then she felt a wild exhilaration. She was riding a bear! And the Aurora was swaying above them in golden arcs and loops, and all around was the bitter arctic cold and the immense silence of the North.

Irek Byrnison's paws made hardly any sound as they padded forward through the snow. The trees were thin and stunted here, for they were on the edge of the tundra, but there were brambles and snagging bushes in the path. The bear ripped through them as if they were cobwebs.

They climbed the low ridge, among outcrops of black rock, and were soon out of sight of the party behind them. Lyra wanted to talk to the bear, and if he had been human, she would already be on familiar terms with him; but he was so strange and wild and cold that she was shy, almost for the first time in her life. So as he loped along, his great legs swinging tirelessly, she sat with the movement and said nothing. Perhaps he preferred that anyway, she thought; she must seem a little prattling cub, only just past babyhood, in the eyes of an armored bear.

She had seldom considered herself before, and found the experience interesting but uncomfortable, very like riding the bear, in fact. Iorek Byrnison was pacing swiftly, moving both legs on one side of his body at the same time, and rocking from side to side in a steady powerful rhythm. She found she couldn't just sit: she had to ride actively. They had been traveling for an hour or more, and Lyra was stiff and sore but deeply happy, when Iorek Byrnison slowed down and stopped.

"Look up," he said. Lyra raised her eyes and had to wipe them with the inside of her wrist, for she was so cold that tears were blurring them. When she could see clearly, she gasped at the sight of the sky. The Aurora had faded to a pallid trembling glimmer, but the stars were as bright as diamonds, and across the great dark diamond-scattered vault, hundreds upon hundreds of tiny black shapes were flying out of the east and south toward the north. "Are they birds?" she said.

"They are witches," said the bear.

"Witches! What are they doing?"

"Flying to war, maybe. I have never seen so many at one time."

"Do you know any witches, lorek?"

"I have served some. And fought some, too. This is a sight to frighten Lord Faa. If they are flying to the aid of your enemies, you should all be afraid."

"Lord Faa wouldn't be frightened. You en't afraid, are you?"

"Not yet. When I am, I shall master the fear. But we had better tell Lord Faa about the witches, because the men might not have seen them."

He moved on more slowly, and she kept watching the sky until her eyes splintered again with tears of cold, and she saw no end to the numberless witches flying north.

Finally lorek Byrnison stopped and said, "There is the village."

They were looking down a broken, rugged slope toward a cluster of wooden buildings beside a wide stretch of snow as flat as could be, which Lyra took to be the frozen lake. A wooden jetty showed her she was right. They were no more than five minutes from the place.

"What do you want to do?" the bear asked. Lyra slipped off his back, and found it hard to stand. Her face was stiff with cold and her legs were shaky, but she clung to his fur and stamped until she felt stronger.

"There's a child or a ghost or something down in that village," she said, "or maybe near it, I don't know for certain. I want to go and find him and bring him back to Lord Faa and the others if I can. I thought he was a ghost, but the symbol reader might be telling me something I can't understand."

"If he is outside," said the bear, "he had better have some shelter."

"I don't think he's dead," said Lyra, but she was far from sure. The alethiometer had indicated something uncanny and unnatural, which was alarming; but who was she? Lord Asriel's daughter. And who was under her command? A mighty bear. How could she possibly show any fear? "Let's just go and look," she said. She clambered on his back again, and he set off down the broken slope, walking steadily and not pacing any more. The dogs of the village smelled or heard or sensed them coming, and began to howl frightfully; and

the reindeer in their enclosure moved about nervously, their antlers clashing like dry sticks. In the still air every movement could be heard for a long way.

As they reached the first of the houses, Lyra looked to the right and left, peering hard into the dimness, for the Aurora was fading and the moon still far from rising. Here and there a light flickered under a snow-thick roof, and Lyra thought she saw pale faces behind some of the windowpanes, and imagined their astonishment to see a child riding a great white bear.

At the center of the little village there was an open space next to the jetty, where boats had been drawn up, mounds under the snow. The noise of the dogs was deafening, and just as Lyra thought it must have wakened everyone, a door opened and a man came out holding a rifle. His wolverine daemon leaped onto the woodstack beside the door, scattering snow.

Lyra slipped down at once and stood between him and Iorek Byrnison, conscious that she had told the bear there was no need for his armor.

The man spoke in words she couldn't understand. lorek Byrnison replied in the same language, and the man gave a little moan of fear.

"He thinks we are devils," lorek told Lyra. "What shall I say?"

"Tell him we're not devils, but we've got friends who are. And we're looking for...Just a child. A strange child. Tell him that."

As soon as the bear had said that, the man pointed to the right, indicating some place further off, and spoke quickly. lorek Byrnison said, "He asks if we have come to take the child away. They are afraid of it. They have tried to drive it away, but it keeps coming back."

"Tell him we'll take it away with us, but they were very bad to treat it like that. Where is it?"

The man explained, gesticulating fearfully. Lyra was afraid he'd fire his rifle by mistake, but as soon as he'd spoken he hastened inside his house and shut the door. Lyra could see faces at every window.

"Where is the child?" she said.

"In the fish house," the bear told her, and turned to pad down toward the jetty. Lyra followed. She was

horribly nervous. The bear was making for a narrow wooden shed, raising his head to sniff this way and that, and when he reached the door he stopped and said: "In there."

Lyra's heart was beating so fast she could hardly breathe. She raised her hand to knock at the door and then, feeling that that was ridiculous, took a deep breath to call out, but realized that she didn't know what to say. Oh, it was so dark now! She should have brought a lantern....

There was no choice, and anyway, she didn't want the bear to see her being afraid. He had spoken of mastering his fear: that was what she'd have to do. She lifted the strap of reindeer hide holding the latch in place, and tugged hard against the frost binding the door shut. It opened with a snap. She had to kick aside the snow piled against the foot of the door before she could pull it open, and Pantalaimon was no help, running back and forth in his ermine shape, a white shadow over the white ground, uttering little frightened sounds.

"Pan, for God's sake!" she said. "Be a bat. Go and look for me...."

But he wouldn't, and he wouldn't speak either. She had never seen him like this except once, when she and Roger in the crypt at Jordan had moved the d^mon-coins into the wrong skulls. He was even more frightened than she was. As for lorek Byrnison, he was lying in the snow nearby, watching in silence.

"Come out," Lyra said as loud as she dared. "Come out!"

Not a sound came in answer. She pulled the door a little wider, and Pantalaimon leaped up into her arms, pushing and pushing at her in his cat form, and said, "Go away! Don't stay here! Oh, Lyra, go now! Turn back!"

Trying to hold him still, she was aware of lorek Byrnison getting to his feet, and turned to see a figure hastening down the track from the village, carrying a lantern. When he came close enough to speak, he raised the lantern and held it to show his face: an old man with a broad, lined face, and eyes nearly lost in a thousand wrinkles. His daemon was an arctic fox.

He spoke, and lorek Byrnison said:

"He says that it's not the only child of that kind. He's seen others in the forest. Sometimes they die quickly, sometimes they don't die. This one is tough, he thinks. But it would be better for him if he died."

"Ask him if I can borrow his lantern," Lyra said. The bear spoke, and the man handed it to her at once, nodding vigorously. She realized that he'd come down in order to bring it to her, and thanked him, and he nodded again and stood back, away from her and the hut and away from the bear. Lyra thought suddenly: what if the child is Roger? And she prayed with all her force that it wouldn't be. Pantalaimon was clinging to her, an ermine again, his little claws hooked deep into her anorak.

She lifted the lantern high and took a step into the shed, and then she saw what it was that the Oblation Board was doing, and what was the nature of the sacrifice the children were having to make.

The little boy was huddled against the wood drying rack where hung row upon row of gutted fish, all as stiff as boards. He was clutching a piece of fish to him as Lyra was clutching Pantalaimon,

with her left hand, hard, against her heart; but that was all he had, a piece of dried fish; because he had no da;mon at all. The Gobblers had cut it away. That was intercision, and this was a severed child.