

## SEVENTEEN

### THE WITCHES

Lyra moaned and trembled uncontrollably, just as if she had been pulled out of water so cold that her heart had nearly frozen. Pantalaimon simply lay against her bare skin, inside her clothes, loving her back to herself, but aware all the time of Mrs. Coulter, busy preparing a drink of something, and most of all of the golden monkey, whose hard little fingers had run swiftly over Lyra's body when only Pantalaimon could have noticed; and who had felt, around her waist, the oilskin pouch with its contents.

"Sit up, dear, and drink this," said Mrs. Coulter, and her gentle arm slipped around Lyra's back and lifted her.

Lyra clenched herself, but relaxed almost at once as Pantalaimon thought to her: We're only safe as long as we pretend. She opened her eyes and found that they'd been containing tears, and to her surprise and shame she sobbed and sobbed. Mrs. Coulter made sympathetic sounds and put the drink into the monkey's hands while she mopped Lyra's eyes with a scented handkerchief.

"Cry as much as you need to, darling," said that soft voice, and Lyra determined to stop as soon as she possibly could. She struggled to hold back the tears, she pressed her lips together, she choked down the sobs that still shook her chest.

Pantalaimon played the same game: fool them, fool them. He became a mouse and crept away from Lyra's hand to sniff timidly at the drink in the monkey's clutch. It was innocuous: an infusion of chamomile, nothing more. He crept back to Lyra's shoulder and whispered, "Drink it."

She sat up and took the hot cup in both hands, alternately sipping and blowing to cool it. She kept her eyes down. She must pretend harder than she'd ever done in her life.

"Lyra, darling," Mrs. Coulter murmured, stroking her hair. "I thought we'd lost you forever! What happened? Did you get lost? Did someone take you out of the flat?"

"Yeah," Lyra whispered.

"Who was it, dear?"

"A man and a woman."

"Guests at the party?"

"I think so. They said you needed something that was downstairs and I went to get it and they grabbed hold of me and took me in a car somewhere. But when they stopped, I ran out quick and dodged away and they never caught me. But I didn't know where I was...."

Another sob shook her briefly, but they were weaker now, and she could pretend this one was caused by her story.

"And I just wandered about trying to find my way back, only these Gobblers caught me....And they put me in a van with some other kids and took me somewhere, a big building, I dunno where it was."

With every second that went past, with every sentence she spoke, she felt a little strength flowing back. And now that she was doing something difficult and familiar and never quite predictable, namely lying, she felt a sort of mastery again, the same sense of complexity and control that the alethiometer gave her. She had to be careful not to say anything obviously impossible; she had to be vague in some places and invent

plausible details in others; she had to be an artist, in short.

"How long did they keep you in this building?" said Mrs. Coulter. Lyra's journey along the canals and her time with the gyp-tians had taken weeks: she'd have to account for that time. She invented a voyage with the Gobblers to Trollesund, and then an escape, lavish with details from her observation of the town; and a time as maid- of-all-work at Einarsson's Bar, and then a spell working for a family of farmers inland, and then being caught by the Samoyeds and brought to Bolvangar.

"And they were going to—going to cut—"

"Hush, dear, hush. I'm going to find out what's been going on."

"But why were they going to do that? I never done anything wrong! All the kids are afraid of what happens in there, and no one knows. But it's horrible. It's worse than anything....Why are they doing that, Mrs. Coulter? Why are they so cruel?"

"There, there...You're safe, my dear. They won't ever do it to you. Now I know you're here, and you're safe, you'll never be in danger again. No one's

going to harm you, Lyra darling; no one's ever going to hurt you...."

"But they do it to other children! Why?"

"Ah, my love—"

"It's Dust, isn't it?"

"Did they tell you that? Did the doctors say that?"

"The kids know it. All the kids talk about it, but no one knows! And they nearly done it to me—you got to tell me! You got no right to keep it secret, not anymore!"

"Lyra...Lyra, Lyra. Darling, these are big difficult ideas, Dust and so on. It's not something for children to worry about. But the doctors do it for the children's own good, my love. Dust is something bad, something wrong, something evil and wicked. Grownups and their daemons are infected with Dust so deeply that it's too late for them. They can't be helped....But a quick operation on children means they're safe from it. Dust just won't stick to them ever again. They're safe and happy and—"

Lyra thought of little Tony Makarios. She leaned forward suddenly and retched. Mrs. Coulter moved back and let go.

"Are you all right, dear? Go to the bathroom—"

Lyra swallowed hard and brushed her eyes.

"You don't have to do that to us," she said. "You could just leave us. I bet Lord Asriel wouldn't let anyone do that if he knew what was going on. If he's got Dust and you've got Dust, and the Master of Jordan and every other grownup's got Dust, it must be all right. When I get out I'm going to tell all the kids in the world about this. Anyway, if it was so good, why'd you stop them doing it to me? If it was good, you should've let them do it. You should have been glad."

Mrs. Coulter was shaking her head and smiling a sad wise smile.

"Darling," she said, "some of what's good has to hurt us a little, and naturally it's upsetting for others if you're upset.... But it doesn't mean your daemon is taken away from you. He's still there! Goodness me, a lot of the grownups here have had

the operation. The nurses seem happy enough, don't they?"

Lyra blinked. Suddenly she understood their strange blank incuriosity, the way their little trotting daemons seemed to be sleepwalking.

Say nothing, she thought, and shut her mouth hard.

"Darling, no one would ever dream of performing an operation on a child without testing it first. And no one in a thousand years would take a child's daemon away altogether! All that happens is a little cut, and then everything's peaceful. Forever! You see, your daemon's a wonderful friend and companion when you're young, but at the age we call puberty, the age you're coming to very soon, darling, daemons bring all sort of troublesome thoughts and feelings, and that's what lets Dust in. A quick little operation before that, and you're never troubled again. And your daemon stays with you, only...just not connected. Like a...like a wonderful pet, if you like. The best pet in the world! Wouldn't you like that?"

Oh, the wicked liar, oh, the shameless untruths she was telling! And even if Lyra hadn't known them to

be lies (Tony Makarios; those caged daemons) she would have hated it with a furious passion. Her dear soul, the daring companion of her heart, to be cut away and reduced to a little trotting pet? Lyra nearly blazed with hatred, and Pantalaimon in her arms became a polecat, the most ugly and vicious of all his forms, and snarled. But they said nothing. Lyra held Pantalaimon tight and let Mrs. Coulter stroke her hair.

"Drink up your chamomile," said Mrs. Coulter softly. "We'll have them make up a bed for you in here. There's no need to go back and share a dormitory with other girls, not now I've got my little assistant back. My favorite! The best assistant in the world. D'you know, we searched all over London for you, darling? We had the police searching every town in the land. Oh, I missed you so much! I can't tell you how happy I am to find you again...."

All the time, the golden monkey was prowling about restlessly, one minute perching on the table swinging his tail, the next clinging to Mrs. Coulter and chittering softly in her ear, the next pacing the floor with tail erect. He was betraying Mrs.



Coulter's impatience, of course, and finally she couldn't hold it in.

"Lyra, dear," she said, "I think that the Master of Jordan gave you something before you left. Isn't that right? He gave you an alethiometer. The trouble is, it wasn't his to give. It was left in his care. It's really too valuable to be carried about—d'you know, it's one of only two or three in the world! I think the Master gave it to you in the hope that it would fall into Lord Asriel's hands. He told you not to tell me about it, didn't he?"

Lyra twisted her mouth.

"Yes, I can see. Well, never mind, darling, because you didn't tell me, did you? So you haven't broken any promises. But listen, dear, it really ought to be properly looked after. I'm afraid it's so rare and delicate that we can't let it be at risk any longer."

"Why shouldn't Lord Asriel have it?" Lyra said, not moving.

"Because of what he's doing. You know he's been sent away to exile, because he's got something dangerous and wicked in mind. He needs the alethiometer to finish his plan, but believe me,

dear, the last thing anyone should do is let him have it. The Master of Jordan was sadly mistaken. But now that you know, it really would be better to let me have it, wouldn't it? It would save you the trouble of carrying it around, and all the worry of looking after it—and really it must have been such a puzzle, wondering what a silly old thing like that was any good for....”

Lyra wondered how she had ever, ever, ever found this woman to be so fascinating and clever.

“So if you've got it now, dear, you'd really better let me have it to look after. It's in that belt around your waist, isn't it? Yes, that was a clever thing to do, putting it away like this....”

Her hands were at Lyra's skirt, and then she was unfastening the stiff oilcloth. Lyra tensed herself. The golden monkey was crouching at the end of the bed, trembling with anticipation, little black hands to his mouth. Mrs. Coulter pulled the belt away from Lyra's waist and unbuttoned the pouch. She was breathing fast. She took out the black velvet cloth and unfolded it, finding the tin box lorek Byrnison had made.

Pantalaimon was a cat again, tensed to spring. Lyra drew her legs up away from Mrs. Coulter, and swung them down to the floor so that she too could run when the time came.

"What's this?" said Mrs. Coulter, as if amused.

"What a funny old tin! Did you put it in here to keep it safe, dear? All this moss...You have been careful, haven't you? Another tin, inside the first one! And soldered! Who did this, dear?"

She was too intent on opening it to wait for an answer. She had a knife in her handbag with a lot of different attachments, and she pulled out a blade and dug it under the lid. At once a furious buzzing filled the room.

Lyra and Pantalaimon held themselves still. Mrs. Coulter, puzzled, curious, pulled at the lid, and the golden monkey bent close to look.

Then in a dazzling moment the black form of the spy-fly hurtled out of the tin and crashed hard into the monkey's face.

He screamed and flung himself backward; and of course it was hurting Mrs. Coulter too, and she cried out in pain and fright with the monkey, and

then the little clockwork devil swarmed upward at her, up her breast and throat toward her face.

Lyra didn't hesitate. Pantalaimon sprang for the door and she was after him at once, and she tore it open and raced away faster than she had ever run in her life.

"Fire alarm!" Pantalaimon shrieked, as he flew ahead of her. She saw a button on the next corner, and smashed the glass with her desperate fist. She ran on, heading toward the dormitories, smashed another alarm and another, and then people began to come out into the corridor, looking up and down for the fire.

By this time she was near the kitchen, and Pantalaimon flashed a thought into her mind, and she darted in. A moment later she had turned on all the gas taps and flung a match at the nearest burner. Then she dragged a bag of flour from a shelf and hurled it at the edge of a table so it burst and filled the air with white, because she had heard that flour will explode if it's treated like that near a flame.

Then she ran out and on as fast as she could toward her own dormitory. The corridors were full

now: children running this way and that, vivid with excitement, for the word escape had got around. The oldest were making for the storerooms where the clothing was kept, and herding the younger ones with them. Adults were trying to control it all, and none of them knew what was happening. Shouting, pushing, crying, jostling people were everywhere.

Through it all Lyra and Pantalaimon darted like fish, making always for the dormitory, and just as they reached it, there was a dull explosion from behind that shook the building.

The other girls had fled: the room was empty. Lyra dragged the locker to the corner, jumped up, hauled the furs out of the ceiling, felt for the alethiometer. It was still there. She tugged the furs on quickly, pulling the hood forward, and then Pantalaimon, a sparrow at the door, called:

"Now!"

She ran out. By luck a group of children who'd already found some cold-weather clothing were racing down the corridor toward the main entrance, and she joined them, sweating, her heart thumping, knowing that she had to escape or die.

The way was blocked. The fire in the kitchen had taken quickly, and whether it was the flour or the gas, something had brought down part of the roof. People were clambering over twisted struts and girders to get up to the bitter cold air. The smell of gas was strong. Then came another explosion, louder than the first and closer. The blast knocked several people over, and cries of fear and pain filled the air.

Lyra struggled up, and with Pantalaimon calling, "This way! This way!" among the other daemon-cries and flutter-ings, she hauled herself over the rubble. The air she was breathing was frozen, and she hoped that the children had managed to find their outdoor clothing; it would be a fine thing to escape from the station only to die of cold. There really was a blaze now. When she got out onto the roof under the night sky, she could see flames licking at the edges of a great hole in the side of the building. There was a throng of children and adults by the main entrance, but this time the adults were more agitated and the children more fearful: much more fearful.

"Roger! Roger!" Lyra called, and Pantalaimon, keen-eyed as an owl, hooted that he'd seen him. A moment later they found each other.

"Tell 'em all to come with me!" Lyra shouted into his ear.

"They won't—they're all panicky—"

"Tell 'em what they do to the kids that vanish! They cut their demons off with a big knife! Tell 'em what you saw this afternoon—all them daemons we let out! Tell 'em that's going to happen to them too unless they get away!"

Roger gaped, horrified, but then collected his wits and ran to the nearest group of hesitating children. Lyra did the same, and as the message passed along, some children cried out and clutched their daemons in fear.

"Come with me!" Lyra shouted. "There's a rescue a coming! We got to get out of the compound! Come on, run!"

The children heard her and followed, streaming across the enclosure toward the avenue of lights, their boots pattering and creaking in the hard-packed snow.

Behind them, adults were shouting, and there was a rumble and crash as another part of the building fell in. Sparks gushed into the air, and flames billowed out with a sound like tearing cloth; but cutting through this came another sound, dreadfully close and violent. Lyra had never heard it before, but she knew it at once: it was the howl of the Tartar guards' wolf daemons. She felt weak from head to foot, and many children turned in fear and stumbled to a stop, for there running at a low swift tireless lope came the first of the Tartar guards, rifle at the ready, with the mighty leaping grayness of his daemon beside him.

Then came another, and another. They were all in padded mail, and they had no eyes—or at least you couldn't see any eyes behind the snow slits of their helmets. The only eyes you could see were the round black ends of the rifle barrels and the blazing yellow eyes of the wolf daemons above the slaver dripping from their jaws.

Lyra faltered. She hadn't dreamed of how frightening those wolves were. And now that she knew how casually people at Bolvangar broke the



great taboo, she shrank from the thought of those dripping teeth....

The Tartars ran to stand in a line across the entrance to the avenue of lights, their daemons beside them as disciplined and drilled as they were. In another minute there'd be a second line, because more were coming, and more behind them. Lyra thought with despair: children can't fight soldiers. It wasn't like the battles in the Oxford claybeds, hurling lumps of mud at the brickburners' children.

Or perhaps it was! She remembered hurling a handful of clay in the broad face of a brickburner boy bearing down on her. He'd stopped to claw the stuff out of his eyes, and then the townies leaped on him.

She'd been standing in the mud. She was standing in the snow.

Just as she'd done that afternoon, but in deadly earnest now, she scooped a handful together and hurled it at the nearest soldier.

"Get 'em in the eyes!" she yelled, and threw another. Other children joined in, and then

someone's daemon had the notion of flying as a swift beside the snowball and nudging it directly at the eye slits of the target—and then they all joined in, and in a few moments the Tartars were stumbling about, spitting and cursing and trying to brush the packed snow out of the narrow gap in front of their eyes.

“Come on!” Lyra screamed, and flung herself at the gate into the avenue of lights. The children streamed after her, every one, dodging the snapping jaws of the wolves and racing as hard as they could down the avenue toward the beckoning open dark beyond. A harsh scream came from behind as an officer shouted an order, and then a score of rifle bolts worked at once, and then there was another scream and a tense silence, with only the fleeing children's pounding feet and gasping breath to be heard.

They were taking aim. They wouldn't miss.

But before they could fire, a choking gasp came from one of the Tartars, and a cry of surprise from another.

Lyra stopped and turned to see a man lying on the snow, with a gray-feathered arrow in his back. He

was writhing and twitching and coughing out blood, and the other soldiers were looking around to left and right for whoever had fired it, but the archer was nowhere to be seen.

And then an arrow came flying straight down from the sky, and struck another man behind the head. He fell at once. A shout from the officer, and everyone looked up at the dark sky.

"Witches!" said Pantalaimon. And so they were: ragged elegant black shapes sweeping past high above, with a hiss and swish of air through the needles of the cloud-pine branches they flew on. As Lyra watched, one swooped low and loosed an arrow: another man fell.

And then all the Tartars turned their rifles up and blazed into the dark, firing at nothing, at shadows, at clouds, and more and more arrows rained down on them.

But the officer in charge, seeing the children almost away, ordered a squad to race after them. Some children screamed. And then more screamed, and they weren't moving forward anymore, they were turning back in confusion,

terrified by the monstrous shape hurtling toward them from the dark beyond the avenue of lights.

"Irek Byrnison!" cried Lyra, her chest nearly bursting with joy.

The armored bear at the charge seemed to be conscious of no weight except what gave him momentum. He bounded past Lyra almost in a blur and crashed into the Tartars, scattering soldiers, daemons, rifles to all sides. Then he stopped and whirled round, with a lithe athletic power, and struck two massive blows, one to each side, at the guards closest to him.

A wolf daemon leaped at him: he slashed at her in midair, and bright fire spilled out of her as she fell to the snow, where she hissed and howled before vanishing. Her human died at once.

The Tartar officer, faced with this double attack, didn't hesitate. A long high scream of orders, and the force divided itself into two: one to keep off the witches, the bigger part to overcome the bear. His troops were magnificently brave. They dropped to one knee in groups of four and fired their rifles as if they were on the practice range, not budging an inch as Irek's mighty bulk hurtled toward them.

A moment later they were dead. Iorek struck again, twisting to one side, slashing, snarling, crushing, while bullets flew about him like wasps or flies, doing no harm at all. Lyra urged the children on and out into the darkness beyond the lights. They must get away, because dangerous as the Tartars were, far more dangerous were the adults of Bolvangar.

So she called and beckoned and pushed to get the children moving. As the lights behind them threw long shadows on the snow, Lyra found her heart moving out toward the deep dark of the arctic night and the clean coldness, leaping forward to love it as Pantalaimon was doing, a hare now delighting in his own propulsion.

"Where we going?" someone said.

"There's nothing out here but snow!"

"There's a rescue party coming," Lyra told them.

"There's fifty gyptians or more. I bet there's some relations of yours, too. All the gyptian families that lost a kid, they all sent someone."

"I en't a gyptian," a boy said.

"Don't matter. They'll take you anyway."

"Where?" someone said querulously.

"Home," said Lyra. "That's what I come here for, to rescue you, and I brung the gyptians here to take you home again. We just got to go on a bit further and then we'll find 'em. The bear was with 'em, so they can't be far off."

"D'you see that bear!" one boy was saying. "When he slashed open that daemon—the man died as if someone whipped his heart out, just like that!"

"I never knew daemons could be killed," someone else said.

They were all talking now; the excitement and relief had loosened everyone's tongue. As long as they kept moving, it didn't matter if they talked.

"Is that true," said a girl, "about what they do back there?"

"Yeah," Lyra said. "I never thought I'd ever see anyone without their daemon. But on the way here, we found this boy on his own without any daemon. He kept asking for her, where she was, would she ever find him. He was called Tony Makarios."

"I know him!" said someone, and others joined in: "Yeah, they took him away about a week back...."

"Well, they cut his daemon away," said Lyra, knowing how it would affect them. "And a little bit after we found him, he died. And all the daemons they cut away, they kept them in cages in a square building back there."

"It's true," said Roger. "And Lyra let 'em out during the fire drill."

"Yeah, I seen 'em!" said Billy Costa. "I didn't know what they was at first, but I seen 'em fly away with that goose."

"But why do they do it?" demanded one boy. "Why do they cut people's daemons away? That's torture! Why do they do it?"

"Dust," suggested someone doubtfully. But the boy laughed in scorn. "Dust!" he said. "There en't no such thing! They just made that up! I don't believe in it."

"Here," said someone else, "look what's happening to the zeppelin!"

They all looked back. Beyond the dazzle of lights, where the fight was still continuing, the great length of the airship was not floating freely at the mooring mast any longer; the free end was

drooping downward, and beyond it was rising a globe of—

“Lee Scoresby's balloon!” Lyra cried, and clapped her mit-tened hands with delight. The other children were baffled. Lyra herded them onward, wondering how the aeronaut had got his balloon that far. It was clear what he was doing, and what a good idea, to fill his balloon with the gas out of theirs, to escape by the same means that crippled their pursuit!

“Come on, keep moving, else you'll freeze,” she said, for some of the children were shivering and moaning from the cold, and their daemons were crying too in high thin voices. Pantalaimon found this irritating, and as a wolverine he snapped at one girl's squirrel daemon who was just lying across her shoulder whimpering faintly.

“Get in her coat! Make yourself big and warm her up!” he snarled, and the girl's daemon, frightened, crept inside her coal-silk anorak at once.

The trouble was that coal silk wasn't as warm as proper fur, no matter how much it was padded out with hollow coal-silk fibers. Some of the children looked like walking puffballs, they were so bulky,



but their gear had been made in factories and laboratories far away from the cold, and it couldn't really cope. Lyra's furs looked ragged and they stank, but they kept the warmth in.

"If we don't find the gyptians soon, they en't going to last," she whispered to Pantalaimon.

"Keep 'em moving then," he whispered back. "If they lie down, they're finished. You know what Farder Coram said...."

Farder Coram had told her many tales of his own journeys in the North, and so had Mrs. Coulter—always supposing that hers were true. But they were both quite clear about one point, which was that you must keep going.

"How far we gotta go?" said a little boy.

"She's just making us walk out here to kill us," said a girl.

"Rather be out here than back there," someone said.

"I wouldn't! It's warm back in the station. There's food and hot drinks and everything."

"But it's all on fire!"

"What we going to do out here? I bet we starve to death...."

Lyra's mind was full of dark questions that flew around like witches, swift and untouchable, and somewhere, just beyond where she could reach, there was a glory and a thrill which she didn't understand at all.

But it gave her a surge of strength, and she hauled one girl up out of a snowdrift, and shoved at a boy who was dawdling, and called to them all: "Keep going! Follow the bear's tracks! He come up with the gyptians, so the tracks'll lead us to where they are! Just keep walking!"

Big flakes of snow were beginning to fall. Soon it would have covered lorek Byrnison's tracks altogether. Now that they were out of sight of the lights of Bolvangar, and the blaze of the fire was only a faint glow, the only light came from the faint radiance of the snow-covered ground. Thick clouds obscured the sky, so there was neither moon nor Northern Lights; but by peering closely, the children could make out the deep trail lorek Byrnison had plowed in the snow. Lyra encouraged, bullied, hit, half-carried, swore at, pushed, dragged,

lifted tenderly, wherever it was needed, and Pantalaimon (by the state of each child's daemon) told her what was needed in each case.

I'll get them there, she kept saying to herself. I come here to get 'em and I'll bloody get 'em.

Roger was following her example, and Billy Costa was leading the way, being sharper-eyed than most. Soon the snow was falling so thickly that they had to cling on to one another to keep from getting lost, and Lyra thought, perhaps if we all lie close and keep warm like that...Dig holes in the snow...

She was hearing things. There was the snarl of an engine somewhere, not the heavy thump of a zeppelin but something higher like the drone of a hornet. It drifted in and out of hearing.

And howling...Dogs? Sledge dogs? That too was distant and hard to be sure of, blanketed by millions of snowflakes and blown this way and that by little puffing gusts of wind. It might have been the gyptians' sledge dogs, or it might have been wild spirits of the tundra, or even those freed daemons crying for their lost children. She was seeing things....There weren't any lights in the

snow, were there? They must be ghosts as well....Unless they'd come round in a circle, and were stumbling back into Bolvangar.

But these were little yellow lantern beams, not the white glare of anbaric lights. And they were moving, and the howling was nearer, and before she knew for certain whether she'd fallen asleep, Lyra was wandering among familiar figures, and men in furs were holding her up: John Faa's mighty arm lifted her clear of the ground, and Farder Coram was laughing with pleasure; and as far through the blizzard as she could see, gyptians were lifting children into sledges, covering them with furs, giving them seal meat to chew. And Tony Costa was there, hugging Billy and then punching him softly only to hug him again and shake him for joy. And Roger...

"Roger's coming with us," she said to Farder Coram. "It was him I meant to get in the first place. We'll go back to Jordan in the end. What's that noise—"

It was that snarl again, that engine, like a crazed spy-fly ten thousand times the size. Suddenly there came a blow that sent her sprawling, and

Pantalaimon couldn't defend her, because the golden monkey—

Mrs. Coulter—

The golden monkey was wrestling, biting, scratching at Pantalaimon, who was nickering through so many changes of form it was hard to see him, and fighting back: stinging, lashing, tearing. Mrs. Coulter, meanwhile, her face in its furs a frozen glare of intense feeling, was dragging Lyra to the back of a motorized sledge, and Lyra struggled as hard as her daemon. The snow was so thick that they seemed to be isolated in a little blizzard of their own, and the anbaric headlights of the sledge only showed up the thick swirling flakes a few inches ahead.

"Help!" Lyra cried, to the gyptians who were just there in the blinding snow and who could see nothing. "Help me! Farder Coram! Lord Faa! Oh, God, help!"

Mrs. Coulter shrieked a high command in the language of the northern Tartars. The snow swirled open, and there they were, a squad of them, armed

with rifles, and the wolf daemons snarled beside them. The chief saw Mrs. Coulter struggling, and picked up Lyra with one hand as if she were a doll and threw her into the sledge, where she lay stunned and dazed.

A rifle banged, and then another, as the gyptians realized what was happening. But firing at targets you can't see is dangerous when you can't see your own side either. The Tartars, in a tight group now around the sledge, were able to blaze at will into the snow, but the gyptians dared not shoot back for fear of hitting Lyra.

Oh, the bitterness she felt! The tiredness!

Still dazed, with her head ringing, she hauled herself up to find Pantalaimon desperately fighting the monkey still, with wolverine jaws fastened tight on a golden arm, changing no more but grimly hanging on. And who was that?

Not Roger?

Yes, Roger, battering at Mrs. Coulter with fists and feet, hurtling his head against hers, only to be struck down by a Tartar who swiped at him like someone brushing away a fly. It was all a

phantasmagoria now: white, black, a swift green flutter across her vision, ragged shadows, racing light—

A great swirl lifted curtains of snow aside, and into the cleared area leaped Iorek Byrnison, with a clang and screech of iron on iron. A moment later and those great jaws snapped left, right, a paw ripped open a mailed chest, white teeth, black iron, red wet fur—

Then something was pulling her up, powerfully up, and she seized Roger too, tearing him out of the hands of Mrs. Coulter and clinging tight, each child's daemon a shrill bird fluttering in amazement as a greater fluttering swept all around them, and then Lyra saw in the air beside her a witch, one of those elegant ragged black shadows from the high air, but close enough to touch; and there was a bow in the witch's bare hands, and she exerted her bare pale arms (in this freezing air!) to pull the string and then loose an arrow into the eye slit of a mailed and lowering Tartar hood only three feet away—

And the arrow sped in and halfway out at the back, and the man's wolf daemon vanished in midleap even before he hit the ground.

Up! Into midair Lyra and Roger were caught and swept, and found themselves clinging with weakening fingers to a cloud-pine branch, where a young witch was sitting tense with balanced grace, and then she leaned down and to the left and something huge was looming and there was the ground.

They tumbled into the snow beside the basket of Lee Scoresby's balloon.

"Skip inside," called the Texan, "and bring your friend, by all means. Have ye seen that bear?"

Lyra saw that three witches were holding a rope looped around a rock, anchoring the great buoyancy of the gas bag to the earth.

"Get in!" she cried to Roger, and scrambled over the leatherbound rim of the basket to fall in a snowy heap inside. A moment later Roger fell on top of her, and then a mighty noise halfway between a roar and a growl made the very ground shake.



"C'mon, lorek! On board, old feller!" yelled Lee Scoresby, and over the side came the bear in a hideous creak of wicker and bending wood.

At once the aeronaut lowered his arm in a signal, and the witches let go of the rope. The balloon lifted immediately and surged upward into the snow-thick air at a rate Lyra could scarcely believe. After a moment the ground disappeared in the mist, and up they went, faster and faster, so that she thought no rocket could have left the earth more swiftly. She lay holding on to Roger on the floor of the basket, pressed down by the acceleration.

Lee Scoresby was cheering and laughing and uttering wild Texan yells of delight; lorek Byrnison was calmly unfastening his armor, hooking a deft claw into all the linkages and undoing them with a twist before packing the separate pieces in a pile. Somewhere outside, the flap and swish of air through cloud-pine needles and witch garments told that the witches were keeping them company into the upper airs.

Little by little Lyra recovered her breath, her balance, and her heartbeat. She sat up and looked around.

The basket was much bigger than she'd thought. Ranged around the edges were racks of philosophical instruments, and there were piles of furs, and bottled air, and a variety of other things too small or confusing to make out in the thick mist they were ascending through. "Is this a cloud?" she said.

"Sure is. Wrap your friend in some furs before he turns into an icicle. It's cold here, but it's gonna get colder." "How did you find us?"

"Witches. There's one witch lady who wants to talk to you. When we get clear of the cloud, we'll get our bearings and then we can sit and have a yarn."

"lorek," said Lyra, "thank you for coming." The bear grunted, and settled down to lick the blood off his fur. His weight meant that the basket was tilted to one side, but that didn't matter. Roger was wary, but lorek Byrnison took no more notice of him than of a flake of snow. Lyra contented herself with clinging to the rim of the basket, just under her

chin when she was standing, and peering wide-eyed into the swirling cloud.

Only a few seconds later the balloon passed out of the cloud altogether and, still rising rapidly, soared on into the heavens.

What a sight!

Directly above them the balloon swelled out in a huge curve. Above and ahead of them the Aurora was blazing, with more brilliance and grandeur than she had ever seen. It was all around, or nearly, and they were nearly part of it. Great swathes of incandescence trembled and parted like angels' wings beating; cascades of luminescent glory tumbled down invisible crags to lie in swirling pools or hang like vast waterfalls.

So Lyra gasped at that, and then she looked below, and saw a sight almost more wondrous.

As far as the eye could see, to the very horizon in all directions, a tumbled sea of white extended without a break. Soft peaks and vaporous chasms rose or opened here and there, but mostly it looked like a solid mass of ice. And rising through it in ones and twos and larger groups as well came

small black shadows, those ragged figures of such elegance, witches on their branches of cloud-pine. They flew swiftly, without any effort, up and toward the balloon, leaning to one side or another to steer. And one of them, the archer who'd saved Lyra from Mrs. Coulter, flew directly alongside the basket, and Lyra saw her clearly for the first time.

She was young—younger than Mrs. Coulter; and fair, with bright green eyes; and clad like all the witches in strips of black silk, but wearing no furs, no hood or mittens. She seemed to feel no cold at all. Around her brow was a simple chain of little red flowers. She sat on her cloud-pine branch as if it were a steed, and seemed to rein it in a yard from Lyra's wondering gaze.

"Lyra?"

"Yes! And are you Serafina Pekkala?"

"I am."

Lyra could see why Farder Coram loved her, and why it was breaking his heart, though she had known neither of those things a moment before. He was growing old; he was an old broken man; and she would be young for generations.

"Have you got the symbol reader?" said the witch, in a voice so like the high wild singing of the Aurora itself that Lyra could hardly hear the sense for the sweet sound of it.

"Yes. I got it in my pocket, safe."

Great wingbeats told of another arrival, and then he was gliding beside her: the gray goose daemon. He spoke briefly and then wheeled away to glide in a wide circle around the balloon as it continued to rise.

"The gyptians have laid waste to Bolvangar," said Serafina Pekkala. "They have killed twenty-two guards and nine of the staff, and they've set light to every part of the buildings that still stood. They are going to destroy it completely."

"What about Mrs. Coulter?"

"No sign of her."

"And the kids? They got all the kids safely?"

"Every one. They are all safe."

Serafina Pekkala cried out in a wild yell, and other witches circled and flew in toward the balloon.

"Mr. Scoresby," she said. "The rope, if you please."

"Ma'am, I'm very grateful. We're still rising. I guess we'll go on up awhile yet. How many of you will it take to pull us north?"

"We are strong" was all she said.

Lee Scoresby was attaching a coil of stout rope to the leather-covered iron ring that gathered the ropes running over the gas bag, and from which the basket itself was suspended. When it was securely fixed, he threw the free end out, and at once six witches darted toward it, caught hold, and began to pull, urging the cloud-pine branches toward the Polar Star.

As the balloon began to move in that direction, Pan-talaimon came to perch on the edge of the basket as a tern. Roger's daemon came out to look, but crept back again soon, for Roger was fast asleep, as was Iorek Byrnison. Only Lee Scoresby was awake, calmly chewing a thin cigar and watching his instruments.

"So, Lyra," said Serafina Pekkala. "Do you know why you're going to Lord Asriel?"

Lyra was astonished. "To take him the alethiometer, of course!" she said. She had never considered the

question; it was obvious. Then she recalled her first motive, from so long ago that she'd almost forgotten it.

"Or... To help him escape. That's it. We're going to help him get away."

But as she said that, it sounded absurd. Escape from Svalbard? Impossible!

"Try, anyway," she added stoutly. "Why?"

"I think there are things I need to tell you," said Serafina Pekkala.

"About Dust?"

It was the first thing Lyra wanted to know.

"Yes, among other things. But you are tired now, and it will be a long flight. We'll talk when you wake up."

Lyra yawned. It was a jaw-cracking, lung-bursting yawn that lasted almost a minute, or felt like it, and for all that Lyra struggled, she couldn't resist the onrush of sleep. Serafina Pekkala reached a hand over the rim of the basket and touched her eyes, and as Lyra sank to the floor, Pantalaimon fluttered

down, changed to an ermine, and crawled to his sleeping place by her neck.

The witch settled her branch into a steady speed beside the basket as they moved north toward Svalbard.