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The Subtle Knife

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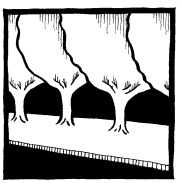
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1

The Cat and the Hornbeam Trees



Will tugged at his mother's hand and said, "Come *on*, come *on*…"

But his mother hung back. She was still afraid. Will looked up and down the narrow street in the evening light, along the little terrace of houses, each behind its tiny garden and its box hedge, with the sun glaring off the windows of one side and leaving the other in shadow. There wasn't much time. People would be having their meal about now, and soon there would be other children around, to stare and comment and notice. It was dangerous to wait, but all he could do was persuade her, as usual.

"Mum, let's go in and see Mrs Cooper," he said. "Look, we're nearly there."

"Mrs Cooper?" she said doubtfully.

But he was already ringing the bell. He had to put down the bag to do it, because his other hand still held his mother's. It might have bothered him at twelve years of age to be seen holding his mother's hand, but he knew what would happen to her if he didn't.

The door opened, and there was the stooped elderly figure of the piano teacher, with the scent of lavender water about her as he remembered.



"Who's that? Is that William?" the old lady said. "I haven't seen you for over a year. What do you want, dear?"

"I want to come in, please, and bring my mother," he said firmly.

Mrs Cooper looked at the woman with the untidy hair and the distracted half-smile, and at the boy with the fierce unhappy glare in his eyes, the tight-set lips, the jutting jaw. And then she saw that Mrs Parry, Will's mother, had put make-up on one eye but not on the other. And she hadn't noticed. And neither had Will. Something was wrong.

"Well…" she said, and stepped aside to make room in the narrow hall.

Will looked up and down the road before closing the door, and Mrs Cooper saw how tightly Mrs Parry was clinging to her son's hand, and how tenderly he guided her into the sitting room where the piano was (of course, that was the only room he knew); and she noticed that Mrs Parry's clothes smelt slightly musty, as if they'd been too long in the washing machine before drying; and how similar the two of them looked as they sat on the sofa with the evening sun full on their faces, their broad cheekbones, their wide eyes, their straight black brows.

"What is it, William?" the old lady said. "What's the matter?"

"My mother needs somewhere to stay for a few days," he said. "It's too difficult to look after her at home just now. I don't mean she's ill. She's just kind of confused and muddled and she gets a bit worried. She won't be hard to look after. She just needs someone to be kind to her and I think you could do that quite easily, probably."

The woman was looking at her son without seeming to understand, and Mrs Cooper saw a bruise on her cheek. Will hadn't taken his eyes off Mrs Cooper, and his expression was desperate.

"She won't be expensive," he went on. "I've brought some

packets of food, enough to last, I should think. You could have some of it too. She won't mind sharing."

"But… I don't know if I should… Doesn't she need a doctor?"

"No! She's not ill."

"But there must be someone who can… I mean, isn't there a neighbour or someone in the family –"

"We haven't got any family. Only us. And the neighbours are too busy."

"What about the social services? I don't mean to put you off, dear, but –"

"No! No. She just needs a bit of help. I can't do it any more for a little while but I won't be long. I'm going to… I've got things to do. But I'll be back soon and I'll take her home again, I promise. You won't have to do it for long."

The mother was looking at her son with such trust, and he turned and smiled at her with such love and reassurance that Mrs Cooper couldn't say no.

"Well," she said, turning to Mrs Parry, "I'm sure it won't matter for a day or so. You can have my daughter's room, dear; she's in Australia; she won't be needing it again."

"Thank you," said Will, and stood up as if he were in a hurry to leave.

"But where are you going to be?" said Mrs Cooper.

"I'm going to be staying with a friend," he said. "I'll phone up as often as I can. I've got your number. It'll be all right."

His mother was looking at him, bewildered. He bent over and kissed her clumsily.

"Don't worry," he said. "Mrs Cooper will look after you better than me, honest. And I'll phone up and talk to you tomorrow."

They hugged tightly, and then Will kissed her again and gently unfastened her arms from his neck before going to the

front door. Mrs Cooper could see he was upset, because his eyes were glistening, but he turned, remembering his manners, and held out his hand.

"Goodbye," he said, "and thank you very much."

"William," she said, "I wish you'd tell me what the matter is –"

"It's a bit complicated," he said, "but she won't be any trouble, honestly."

That wasn't what she meant, and they both knew it; but somehow Will was in charge of this business, whatever it was. The old lady thought she'd never seen a child so implacable.

He turned away, already thinking about the empty house.

The close where Will and his mother lived was a loop of road in a modern estate, with a dozen identical houses of which theirs was by far the shabbiest. The front garden was just a patch of weedy grass; his mother had planted some shrubs earlier in the year, but they'd shrivelled and died for lack of watering. As Will came round the corner, his cat Moxie rose up from her favourite spot under the still-living hydrangea and stretched before greeting him with a soft miaow and butting her head against his leg.

He picked her up and whispered, "Have they come back, Moxie? Have you seen them?"

The house was silent. In the last of the evening light the man across the road was washing his car, but he took no notice of Will, and Will didn't look at him. The less notice people took, the better.

Holding Moxie against his chest, he unlocked the door and went in quickly. Then he listened very carefully before putting her down. There was nothing to hear; the house was empty.

He opened a tin for her and left her to eat in the kitchen. How

long before the man came back? There was no way of telling, so he'd better move quickly. He went upstairs and began to search.

He was looking for a battered green leather writing-case. There are a surprising number of places to hide something that size even in any ordinary modern house; you don't need secret panels and extensive cellars in order to make something hard to find. Will searched his mother's bedroom first, ashamed to be looking through the drawers where she kept her underclothes, and then he worked systematically through the rest of the rooms upstairs, even his own. Moxie came to see what he was doing and sat and cleaned herself nearby, for company.

But he didn't find it.

By that time it was dark, and he was hungry. He made himself baked beans on toast and sat at the kitchen table wondering about the best order to look through the downstairs rooms.

As he was finishing his meal, the phone rang.

He sat absolutely still, his heart thumping. He counted: twenty-six rings, and then it stopped. He put his plate in the sink and started to search again.

Four hours later he still hadn't found the green leather case. It was half-past one, and he was exhausted. He lay on his bed fully clothed and fell asleep at once, his dreams tense and crowded, his mother's unhappy frightened face always there just out of reach.

And almost at once, it seemed (though he'd been asleep for nearly three hours) he woke up knowing two things simultaneously.

First, he knew where the case was. And second, he knew that the men were downstairs, opening the kitchen door.

He lifted Moxie out of the way and softly hushed her sleepy protest. Then he swung his legs over the side of the bed and put on his shoes, straining every nerve to hear the sounds from



downstairs: very quiet sounds: a chair being lifted and replaced, a short whisper, the creak of a floorboard.

Moving more silently than they were, he left his bedroom and tiptoed to the spare room at the top of the stairs. It wasn't quite pitch dark, and in the ghostly grey pre-dawn light he could see the old treadle sewing machine. He'd been through the room thoroughly only hours before, but he'd forgotten the compartment at the side of the sewing machine, where all the patterns and bobbins were kept.

He felt for it delicately, listening all the while. The men were moving about downstairs, and Will could see a dim flicker of light at the edge of the door that might have been a torch.

Then he found the catch of the compartment and clicked it open, and there, just as he'd known it would be, was the leather writing-case.

And now what could he do?

Nothing, for the moment. He crouched in the dimness, heart pounding, listening hard.

The two men were in the hall. He heard one of them say quietly, "Come on. I can hear the milkman down the road."

"It's not here, though," said the other voice. "We'll have to look upstairs."

"Go on, then. Don't hang about."

Will braced himself as he heard the quiet creak of the top step. The man was making no noise at all, but he couldn't help the creakif he wasn't expecting it. Then there was a pause. A very thin beam of torchlight swept along the floor outside: Will saw it through the crack.

Then the door began to move. Will waited till the man was framed in the open doorway, and then exploded up out of the dark and crashed into the intruder's belly.

But neither of them saw the cat.

As the man had reached the top step, Moxie had come silently out of the bedroom and stood with raised tail just behind the man's legs, ready to rub herself against them. The man could have dealt with Will, because he was trained and fit and hard, but the cat was in the way, and as he tried to move back he tripped over her. With a sharp gasp he fell backwards down the stairs, crashing his head brutally against the hall table.

Will heard a hideous crack, and didn't stop to wonder about it: he swung himself down the banisters, leaping over the man's body that lay twitching and crumpled at the foot of the flight, seized the tattered shopping bag from the table, and was out of the front door and away before the other man could do more than come out of the living room and stare.

Even in his fear and haste Will wondered why the other man didn't shout after him, or chase him. They'd be after him soon, though, with their cars and their cellphones. The only thing to do was run.

He saw the milkman turning into the close, the lights of his electric cart pallid in the dawn glimmer that was already filling the sky. Will jumped over the fence into next-door's garden, down the passage beside the house, over the next garden wall, across a dew-wet lawn, through the hedge, into the tangle of shrubs and trees between the housing estate and the main road, and there he crawled under a bush and lay panting and trembling. It was too early to be out on the road: wait till later, when the rush hour started.

He couldn't get out of his mind the crack as the man's head had struck the table, and the way his neck was bent so far and in such a wrong way, and the dreadful twitching of his limbs. The man was dead. He'd killed him.

He couldn't get it out of his mind, but he had to. There was quite enough to think about. His mother: would she really be safe



where she was? Mrs Cooper wouldn't tell, would she? Even if Will didn't turn up as he'd said he would? Because he couldn't, now he'd killed someone.

And Moxie. Who'd feed Moxie? Would Moxie worry about where they both were? Would she try to follow them?

It was getting lighter by the minute. It was light enough already to check through the things in the shopping bag: his mother's purse, the latest letter from the lawyer, the road map of southern England, chocolate bars, toothpaste, spare socks and pants. And the green leather writing-case.

Everything was there. Everything was going to plan, really.

Except that he'd killed someone.

Will had first realized his mother was different from other people, and that he had to look after her, when he was seven. They were in a supermarket, and they were playing a game: they were only allowed to put an item in the cart when no one was looking. It was Will's job to look all around and whisper "Now," and she would snatch a tin or a packet from the shelf and put it silently in the cart. When things were in there they were safe, because they became invisible.

It was a good game, and it went on for a long time, because this was a Saturday morning and the shop was full, but they were good at it and worked well together. They trusted each other. Will loved his mother very much and often told her so, and she told him the same.

So when they reached the checkout Will was excited and happy because they'd nearly won. And when his mother couldn't find her purse, that was part of the game too, even when she said the enemies must have stolen it; but Will was getting tired by this time, and hungry too, and Mummy wasn't so happy any more; she was really frightened, and they went round and round putting things

back on the shelves, but this time they had to be extra careful because the enemies were tracking them down by means of her credit card numbers, which they knew because they had her purse…

And Will got more and more frightened himself. He realized how clever his mother had been to make this real danger into a game so that he wouldn't be alarmed, and how, now that he knew the truth, he had to pretend not to be frightened, so as to reassure her.

So the little boy pretended it was a game still, so she didn't have to worry that he was frightened, and they went home without any shopping, but safe from the enemies; and then Will found the purse on the hall table anyway. On Monday they went to the bank and closed her account, and opened another somewhere else, just to be sure. Thus the danger passed.

But some time during the next few months, Will realized slowly and unwillingly that those enemies of his mother's were not in the world out there, but in her mind. That made them no less real, no less frightening and dangerous; it just meant he had to protect her even more carefully. And from the moment in the supermarket when he realized he had to pretend in order not to worry his mother, part of Will's mind was always alert to her anxieties. He loved her so much he would have died to protect her.

As for Will's father, he had vanished long before Will was able to remember him. Will was passionately curious about his father, and he used to plague his mother with questions, most of which she couldn't answer.

"Was he a rich man?"

"Where did he go?"

"Why did he go?"

"Is he dead?"



"Will he come back?"

"What was he like?"

The last question was the only one she could help him with. John Parry had been a handsome man, a brave and clever officer in the Royal Marines, who had left the army to become an explorer and lead expeditions to remote parts of the world. Will thrilled to hear about this. No father could be more exciting than an explorer. From then on, in all his games he had an invisible companion: he and his father were together hacking through the jungle, shading their eyes to gaze out across stormy seas from the deck of their schooner, holding up a torch to decipher mysterious inscriptions in a bat-infested cave… They were the best of friends, they saved each other's life countless times, they laughed and talked together over campfires long into the night.

But the older he got the more Will began to wonder. Why were there no pictures of his father in this part of the world or that, with frost-bearded men on Arctic sledges or examining creeper-covered ruins in the jungle? Had nothing survived of the trophies and curiosities he must have brought home? Was nothing written about him in a book?

His mother didn't know. But one thing she said stuck in his mind.

She said, "One day, you'll follow in your father's footsteps. You're going to be a great man too. You'll take up his mantle…"

And though Will didn't know what that meant, he understood the sense of it, and felt uplifted with pride and purpose. All his games were going to come true. His father was alive, lost somewhere in the wild, and he was going to rescue him and take up his mantle… It was worth living a difficult life, if you had a great aim like that.

So he kept his mother's trouble secret. There were times when she was calmer and clearer than others, and he took care to learn

from her then how to shop and cook and keep the house clean, so that he could do it when she was confused and frightened. And he learned how to conceal himself too, how to remain unnoticed at school, how not to attract attention from the neighbours, even when his mother was in such a state of fear and madness that she could barely speak. What Will himself feared more than anything was that the authorities would find out about her, and take her away, and put him in a home among strangers. Any difficulty was better than that. Because there came times when the darkness cleared from her mind, and she was happy again, and she laughed at her fears and blessed him for looking after her so well; and she was so full of love and sweetness then that he could think of no better companion, and wanted nothing more than to live with her alone for ever.

But then the men came.

They weren't police, and they weren't social services, and they weren't criminals – at least, as far as Will could judge. They wouldn't tell him what they wanted, in spite of his efforts to keep them away; they'd only speak to his mother. And her state was fragile just then.

But he listened outside the door, and heard them ask about his father, and felt his breath come more quickly.

The men wanted to know where John Parry had gone, and whether he'd sent anything back to her, and when she'd last heard from him, and whether he'd had contact with any foreign embassies. Will heard his mother getting more and more distressed, and finally he ran into the room and told them to go.

He looked so fierce that neither of the men laughed, though he was so young. They could easily have knocked him down, or held him off the floor with one hand, but he was fearless, and his anger was hot and deadly.

So they left. Naturally, this episode strengthened Will's



conviction: his father was in trouble somewhere, and only he could help. His games weren't childish any more, and he didn't play so openly. It was coming true, and he had to be worthy of it.

And not long afterwards the men came back, insisting that Will's mother had something to tell them. They came when Will was at school, and one of them kept her talking downstairs while the other searched the bedrooms. She didn't realize what they were doing. But Will came home early and found them, and once again he blazed at them, and once again they left.

They seemed to know that he wouldn't go to the police, for fear of losing his mother to the authorities, and they got more and more persistent. Finally they broke into the house when Will had gone to fetch his mother home from the park: it was getting worse for her now, and she believed that she had to touch every separate slat in every separate bench beside the pond. Will would help her, to get it done quicker. When they got home they saw the back of the men's car disappearing out of the close, and he got inside to find that they'd been through the house and searched most of the drawers and cupboards.

He knew what they were after. The green leather case was his mother's most precious possession; he would never dream of looking through it, and he didn't even know where she kept it. But he knew it contained letters, and he knew she read them sometimes, and cried, and it was then that she talked about his father. So Will supposed that this was what the men were after, and knew he had to do something about it.

He decided first to find somewhere safe for his mother to stay. He thought and thought, but he had no friends to ask, and the neighbours were already suspicious, and the only person he thought he could trust was Mrs Cooper. Once his mother was safely there, he was going to find the green leather case, and look at what was in it, and then he was going to go to Oxford, where

he'd find the answer to some of his questions. But the men came too soon.

And now he'd killed one of them.

So the police would be after him too.

Well, he was good at not being noticed. He'd have to *not be noticed* harder than he'd ever done in his life before, and keep it up as long as he could, till either he found his father or they found him. And if they found him first, he didn't care how many more of them he killed.

Later that day, towards midnight in fact, Will was walking out of the city of Oxford, forty miles away. He was tired to his very bones. He had hitch-hiked, and ridden on two buses, and walked, and reached Oxford at six in the evening, too late to do what he needed to do; and he'd eaten at a Burger King and gone to a cinema to hide (though what the film was, he forgot even as he was watching it) and now he was walking along an endless road through the suburbs, heading north.

No one had noticed him so far. But he was aware that he'd better find somewhere to sleep before long, because the later it got, the more noticeable he'd be. The trouble was that there was nowhere to hide in the gardens of the comfortable houses along this road, and there was still no sign of open country.

He came to a large roundabout where the road going north crossed the Oxford ring road going east and west. At this time of night there was very little traffic, and the road where he stood was quiet, with comfortable houses set back behind a wide expanse of grass on either side. Planted along the grass at the road's edge were two lines of hornbeam trees, odd-looking things with perfectly symmetrical close-leafed crowns, more like children's drawings than like real trees, and the street lights made the scene look artificial, like a stage set. Will was stupefied

with exhaustion, and he might have gone on to the north, or he might have laid his head on the grass under one of those trees and slept; but as he stood trying to clear his head, he saw a cat.

She was a tabby, like Moxie. She padded out of a garden on the Oxford side of the road, where Will was standing. Will put down his shopping bag and held out his hand, and the cat came up to rub her head against his knuckles, just as Moxie did. Of course, every cat behaved like that, but all the same Will felt such a longing to turn for home that tears scalded his eyes.

Eventually this cat turned away. This was night, and there was a territory to patrol, there were mice to hunt. She padded across the road and towards the bushes just beyond the hornbeam trees, and there she stopped.

Will, still watching, saw the cat behave curiously.

She reached out a paw to pat something in the air in front of her, something quite invisible to Will. Then she leapt backwards, back arched and fur on end, tail held out stiffly. Will knew cat-behaviour. He watched more alertly as the cat approached the spot again, just an empty patch of grass between the hornbeams and the bushes of a garden hedge, and patted the air once more.

Again she leapt back, but less far and with less alarm this time. After another few seconds of sniffing, touching, whisker-twitching, curiosity overcame wariness.

The cat stepped forward, and vanished.

Will blinked. Then he stood still, close to the trunk of the nearest tree, as a truck came round the circle and swept its lights over him. When it had gone past he crossed the road, keeping his eyes on the spot where the cat had been investigating. It wasn't easy, because there was nothing to fix on, but when he came to the place and cast about to look closely, he saw it.

At least, he saw it from some angles. It looked as if someone had cut a patch out of the air, about two metres from the edge of

the road, a patch roughly square in shape and less than a metre across. If you were level with the patch so that it was edge-on, it was nearly invisible, and it was completely invisible from behind. You could only see it from the side nearest the road, and you couldn't see it easily even from there, because all you could see through it was exactly the same kind of thing that lay in front of it on this side: a patch of grass lit by a street light.

But Will knew without the slightest doubt that that patch of grass on the other side was in a different world.

He couldn't possibly have said why. He knew it at once, as strongly as he knew that fire burned and kindness was good. He was looking at something profoundly alien.

And for that reason alone, it enticed him to stoop and look further. What he saw made his head swim and his heart thump harder, but he didn't hesitate: he pushed his shopping bag through, and then scrambled through himself, through the hole in the fabric of this world and into another.

He found himself standing under a row of trees. But not hornbeam trees: these were tall palms, and they were growing, like the trees in Oxford, in a line along the grass. But this was the centre of a broad boulevard, and at the side of the boulevard was a line of cafés and small shops, all brightly lit, all open, and all utterly silent and empty beneath a sky thick with stars. The hot night was laden with the scent of flowers and with the salt smell of the sea.

Will looked around carefully. Behind him the full moon shone down over a distant prospect of great green hills, and on the slopes at the foot of the hills there were houses with rich gardens and an open parkland with groves of trees and the white gleam of a classical temple.

Just beside him was that bare patch in the air, as hard to see from this side as from the other, but definitely there. He bent to

look through and saw the road in Oxford, his own world. He turned away with a shudder: whatever this new world was, it had to be better than what he'd just left. With a dawning light-headedness, the feeling that he was dreaming but awake at the same time, he stood up and looked around for the cat, his guide.

She was nowhere in sight. No doubt she was already exploring those narrow streets and gardens beyond the cafés whose lights were so inviting. Will lifted up his tattered shopping bag and walked slowly across the road towards them, moving very carefully in case it all disappeared.

The air of the place had something Mediterranean or maybe Caribbean about it. Will had never been out of England, so he couldn't compare it with anywhere he knew, but it was the kind of place where people came out late at night to eat and drink, to dance and enjoy music. Except that there was no one here, and the silence was immense.

On the first corner he reached there stood a café, with little green tables on the pavement and a zinc-topped bar and an espresso machine. On some of the tables glasses stood half-empty; in one ashtray a cigarette had burned down to the butt; a plate of risotto stood next to a basket of stale rolls as hard as cardboard.

He took a bottle of lemonade from the cooler behind the bar and then thought for a moment before dropping a pound coin in the till. As soon as he'd shut it, he opened it again, realizing that the money in there might say what this place was called. The currency was called the corona, but he couldn't tell any more than that.

He put the money back and opened the bottle on the opener fixed to the counter before leaving the café and wandering down the street going away from the boulevard. Little grocers' shops and bakeries stood between jewellers and florists and bead-

curtained doors opening into private houses, where wrought iron balconies thick with flowers overhung the narrow pavement, and where the silence, being enclosed, was even more profound.

The streets were leading downwards, and before very long they opened out on to a broad avenue where more palm trees reached high into the air, the underside of their leaves glowing in the street lights.

On the other side of the avenue was the sea.

Will found himself facing a harbour enclosed from the left by a stone breakwater and from the right by a headland on which a large building with stone columns and wide steps and ornate balconies stood floodlit among flowering trees and bushes. In the harbour one or two rowing boats lay still at anchor, and beyond the breakwater the starlight glittered on a calm sea.

By now, Will's exhaustion had been wiped out. He was wide awake and possessed by wonder. From time to time, on his way through the narrow streets, he'd put out a hand to touch a wall or a doorway or the flowers in a window-box, and found them solid and convincing. Now he wanted to touch the whole landscape in front of him, because it was too wide to take in through his eyes alone. He stood still, breathing deeply, almost afraid.

He discovered that he was still holding the bottle he'd taken from the café. He drank from it, and it tasted like what it was, ice-cold lemonade; and welcome too, because the night air was hot.

He wandered along to the right, past hotels with awnings over brightly-lit entrances and bougainvillea flowering beside them, until he came to the gardens on the little headland. The building in the trees with its ornate façade lit by floodlights might have been a casino, or even an opera house. There were paths leading here and there among the lamp-hung oleander trees, but not a

sound of life could be heard: no night-birds singing, no insects, nothing but the sound of Will's own footsteps.

The only sound he could hear came from the regular quiet breaking of delicate waves from the beach beyond the palm trees at the edge of the garden. Will made his way there. The tide was half-way in, or half-way out, and a row of pedal-boats was drawn up on the soft white sand above the high-water line. Every few seconds a tiny wave folded itself over at the sea's edge before sliding back neatly under the next. Fifty metres or so out on the calm water was a diving platform.

Will sat on the side of one of the pedal-boats and kicked off his shoes, his cheap trainers that were coming apart and cramping his hot feet. He dropped his socks beside them and pushed his toes deep into the sand. A few seconds later he had thrown off the rest of his clothes and was walking into the sea.

The water was deliciously between cool and warm. He splashed out to the diving platform and pulled himself out to sit on its weather-softened planking and look back at the city.

To his right the harbour lay enclosed by its breakwater. Beyond it a mile or so away stood a red and white striped light-house. And beyond the lighthouse, distant cliffs rose dimly, and beyond them, those great wide rolling hills he'd seen from the place he'd first come through.

Closer at hand were the light-bearing trees of the casino gardens, and the streets of the city, and the waterfront with its hotels and cafés and warm-lit shops, all silent, all empty.

And all safe. No one could follow him here; the man who'd searched the house would never know; the police would never find him. He had a whole world to hide in.

For the first time since he'd run out of his front door that morning, Will began to feel secure.

He was thirsty again, and hungry too, because he'd last eaten

in another world, after all. He slipped back into the water and swam back more slowly to the beach, where he put on his underpants and carried the rest of his clothes and the shopping bag. He dropped the empty bottle into the first rubbish bin he found and walked barefoot along the pavement towards the harbour.

When his skin had dried a little he pulled on his jeans and looked for somewhere he'd be likely to find food. The hotels were too grand. He looked inside the first hotel, but it was so large that he felt uncomfortable, and he kept moving down the waterfront until he found a little café that looked like the right place. He couldn't have said why; it was very similar to a dozen others, with its first-floor balcony laden with flower-pots and its tables and chairs on the pavement outside, but it welcomed him.

There was a bar with photographs of boxers on the wall, and a signed poster of a broadly smiling accordion player. There was a kitchen, and a door beside it that opened on to a narrow flight of stairs, carpeted in a bright floral pattern.

He climbed quietly up to the narrow landing and opened the first door he came to. It was the room at the front. The air was hot and stuffy, and Will opened the glass door on to the balcony to let in the night air. The room itself was small and furnished with things that were too big for it, and shabby, but it was clean and comfortable. Hospitable people lived here. There was a little shelf of books, a magazine on the table, a couple of photographs in frames.

Will left and looked in the other rooms: a little bathroom, a bedroom with a double bed.

Something made his skin prickle before he opened the last door. His heart raced. He wasn't sure if he'd heard a sound from inside, but something told him that the room wasn't empty. He thought how odd it was that this day had begun with someone

outside a darkened room, and himself waiting inside; and now the positions were reversed –

And as he stood wondering, the door burst open and something came hurtling at him like a wild beast.

But his memory had warned him, and he wasn't standing quite close enough to be knocked over. He fought hard: knee, head, fist, and the strength of his arms against it, him, her –

A girl about his own age, ferocious, snarling, with ragged dirty clothes and thin bare limbs.

She realized what he was at the same moment, and snatched herself away from his bare chest, to crouch in the corner of the dark landing like a cat at bay. And there was a cat beside her, to his astonishment: a large wildcat, as tall as his knee, fur on end, teeth bared, tail erect.

She put her hand on the cat's back and licked her dry lips, watching his every movement.

Will stood up slowly.

"Who are you?"

"Lyra Silvertongue," she said.

"Do you live here?"

"No," she said vehemently.

"Then what is this place? This city?"

"I don't know."

"Where do you come from?"

"From my world. It's joined on. Where's your dæmon?"

His eyes widened. Then he saw something extraordinary happen to the cat: it leapt into her arms, and when it got there, it had changed shape. Now it was a red-brown stoat with a cream throat and belly, and it glared at him as ferociously as the girl herself. But then another shift in things took place, because he realized that they were both, girl and stoat, profoundly afraid of him, as much as if he'd been a ghost.

"I haven't got a demon," he said. "I don't know what you mean." Then: "Oh! Is that your demon?"

She stood up slowly. The stoat curled himself around her neck and his dark eyes never left Will's face.

"But you're *alive*," she said, half-disbelievingly. "You en't… You en't been…"

"My name's Will Parry," he said. "I don't know what you mean about demons. In my world demon means… It means devil, something evil."

"In your world? You mean *this* en't your world?"

"No. I just found … a way in. Like your world, I suppose. It must be joined on."

She relaxed a little, but she still watched him intensely, and he stayed calm and quiet as if she were a strange cat he was making friends with.

"Have you seen anyone else in this city?" he went on.

"No."

"How long have you been here?"

"Dunno. A few days. I can't remember."

"So why did you come here?"

"I'm looking for Dust," she said.

"Looking for dust? What, gold dust? What sort of dust?"

She narrowed her eyes and said nothing. He turned away to go downstairs.

"I'm hungry," he said. "Is there any food in the kitchen?"

"I dunno…" she said, and followed, keeping her distance from him.

In the kitchen Will found the ingredients for a casserole of chicken and onions and peppers, but they hadn't been cooked, and in the heat they were smelling bad. He swept them all into the dustbin.

"Haven't you eaten anything?" he said, and opened the fridge.

Lyra came to look.

"I didn't know this was here," she said. "Oh! It's cold…"

Her dæmon had changed again, and become a huge brightly-coloured butterfly, which fluttered into the fridge briefly and out again at once to settle on her shoulder. The butterfly raised and lowered his wings slowly. Will felt he shouldn't stare, though his head was ringing with the strangeness of it.

"Haven't you seen a fridge before?" he said.

He found a can of cola and handed it to her before taking out a tray of eggs. She pressed the can between her palms with pleasure.

"Drink it, then," he said.

She looked at it, frowning. She didn't know how to open it. He snapped the lid for her, and the drink frothed out. She licked it suspiciously and then her eyes opened wide.

"This is good?" she said, her voice half-hoping and half-fearful.

"Yeah. They have Coke in this world, obviously. Look, I'll drink some to prove it isn't poison."

He opened another can. Once she saw him drink, she followed his example. She was obviously thirsty. She drank so quickly that the bubbles got up her nose, and she snorted and belched loudly, and scowled when he looked at her.

"I'm going to make an omelette," he said. "D'you want some?"

"I don't know what omelette is."

"Well, watch and you'll see. Or there's a can of baked beans if you like."

"I don't know baked beans."

He showed her the can. She looked for the snap-open top like the one on the cola can.

"No, you have to use a can-opener," he said. "Don't they have

can-openers in your world?"

"In my world servants do the cooking," she said scornfully.

"Look in the drawer over there."

She rummaged through the kitchen cutlery while he broke six eggs into a bowl and whisked them with a fork.

"That's it," he said, watching. "With the red handle. Bring it here."

He pierced the tin and showed her how to open it.

"Now get that little saucepan off the hook and tip them in," he told her.

She sniffed the beans, and again an expression of pleasure and suspicion entered her eyes. She tipped the can into the saucepan and licked a finger, watching as Will shook salt and pepper into the eggs and cut a knob of butter from a package in the fridge into a cast-iron pan. He went into the bar to find some matches, and when he came back she was dipping her dirty finger in the bowl of beaten eggs and licking it greedily. Her dæmon, a cat again, was dipping his paw in it too, but he backed away when Will came near.

"It's not cooked yet," Will said, taking it away. "When did you last have a meal?"

"At my father's house on Svalbard," she said. "Days and days ago. I don't know. I found bread and stuff here and ate that."

He lit the gas, melted the butter, poured in the eggs and let them run all over the base of the pan. Her eyes followed everything greedily, watching him pull the eggs up into soft ridges in the centre as they cooked and tilt the pan to let raw egg flow into the space. She watched him, too, looked at his face and his working hands and his bare shoulders and his feet.

When the omelette was cooked he folded it over and cut it in half with the spatula.

"Find a couple of plates," he said, and Lyra obediently did so.

She seemed quite willing to take orders if she saw the sense of them, so he told her to go and clear a table in front of the café. He brought out the food and some knives and forks from a drawer, and they sat down together, a little awkwardly.

She ate hers in less than a minute, and then fidgeted, swinging back and forth on her chair and plucking at the plastic strips of the woven seat while he finished his omelette. Her dæmon changed yet again, and became a goldfinch, pecking at invisible crumbs on the table-top.

Will ate slowly. He'd given her most of the beans, but even so he took much longer than she did. The harbour in front of them, the lights along the empty boulevard, the stars in the dark sky above, all hung in the huge silence as if nothing else existed at all.

And all the time he was intensely aware of the girl. She was small and slight, but wiry, and she'd fought like a tiger; his fist had raised a bruise on her cheek, and she was ignoring it. Her expression was a mixture of the very young – when she first tasted the cola – and a kind of deep sad wariness. Her eyes were pale blue and her hair would be a darkish blonde once it was washed; because she was filthy, and she smelled as if she hadn't washed for days.

"Laura? Lara?" Will said.

"Lyra."

"Lyra … Silvertongue?"

"Yes."

"Where is your world? How did you get here?"

She shrugged. "I walked," she said. "It was all foggy. I didn't know where I was going. At least I knew I was going out of *my* world. But I couldn't see this one till the fog cleared. Then I found myself here."

"What did you say about dust?"

"Dust, yeah. I'm going to find out about it. But this world

seems to be empty. There's no one here to ask. I've been here for … I dunno, three days, maybe four. And there's no one here."

"But why do you want to find out about dust?"

"Special Dust," she said shortly. "Not ordinary dust, obviously."

The dæmon changed again. He did so in the flick of an eye, and from a goldfinch he became a rat, a powerful pitch-black rat with red eyes. Will looked at him with wide wary eyes, and the girl saw his glance.

"You *have* got a dæmon," she said decisively. "Inside you."

He didn't know what to say.

"You have," she went on. "You wouldn't be human else. You'd be … half-dead. We seen a kid with his dæmon cut away. You en't like that. Even if you don't know you've got a dæmon, you have. We was scared at first when we saw you. Like you was a night-ghast or something. But then we saw you weren't like that at all."

"We?"

"Me and Pantalaimon. Us. Your dæmon en't *separate* from you. It's you. A part of you. You're part of each other. En't there *anyone* in your world like us? Are they all like you, with their dæmons all hidden away?"

Will looked at the two of them, the skinny pale-eyed girl with her black rat-dæmon now sitting in her arms, and felt profoundly alone.

"I'm tired. I'm going to bed," he said. "Are you going to stay in this city?"

"Dunno. I've got to find out more about what I'm looking for. There must be some scholars in this world. There must be *someone* who knows about it."

"Maybe not in this world. But I came here out of a place called Oxford. There's plenty of scholars there, if that's what you want."



"Oxford?" she cried. "That's where I come from!"

"Is there an Oxford in your world, then? You never came from my world."

"No," she said decisively. "Different worlds. But in my world there's an Oxford too. We're both speaking English, en't we? Stands to reason there's other things the same. How did you get through? Is there a bridge, or what?"

"Just a kind of window in the air."

"Show me," she said.

It was a command, not a request. He shook his head.

"Not now," he said. "I want to sleep. Anyway it's the middle of the night."

"Then show me in the morning!"

"All right, I'll show you. But I've got my own things to do. You'll have to find your scholars by yourself."

"Easy," she said. "I know all about scholars."

He put the plates together and stood up.

"I cooked," he said, "so you can wash the dishes."

She looked incredulous. "Wash the dishes?" she scoffed. "There's millions of clean ones lying about! Anyway I'm not a servant. I'm not going to wash them."

"So I won't show you the way through."

"I'll find it by myself."

"You won't, it's hidden. You'd never find it. Listen. I don't know how long we can stay in this place. We've got to eat, so we'll eat what's here, but we'll tidy up afterwards and keep the place clean, because we ought to. You wash these dishes. We've got to treat this place *right*. Now I'm going to bed. I'll have the other room. I'll see you in the morning."

He went inside, cleaned his teeth with a finger and some toothpaste from his tattered bag, fell on the double bed and was asleep in a moment.

Lyra waited till she was sure he was asleep, and then took the dishes into the kitchen and ran them under the tap, rubbing hard with a cloth until they looked clean. She did the same with the knives and forks, but the procedure didn't work with the omelette pan, so she tried a bar of yellow soap on it, and picked at it stubbornly until it looked as clean as she thought it was going to. Then she dried everything on another cloth and stacked it neatly on the draining board.

Because she was still thirsty and because she wanted to try opening a tin again she snapped open another cola and took it upstairs. She listened outside Will's door and, hearing nothing, tiptoed into the other room and took out the alethiometer from under her pillow.

She didn't need to be close to Will to ask about him, but she wanted to look anyway, and she turned his door handle as quietly as she could before going in.

There was a light on the sea front outside shining straight up into the room, and in the glow reflected from the ceiling she looked down at the sleeping boy. He was frowning, and his face glistened with sweat. He was strong and stocky, not as formed as a grown man, of course, because he wasn't much older than she was, but he'd be powerful one day. How much easier if his dæmon had been visible! She wondered what its form might be, and whether it was fixed yet. Whatever its form was, it would express a nature that was savage, and courteous, and unhappy.

She tiptoed to the window. In the glow from the street lamp she carefully set the hands of the alethiometer, and relaxed her mind into the shape of a question. The needle began to sweep around the dial in a series of pauses and swings almost too fast to watch.

She had asked: *What is he? A friend or an enemy?*



The alethiometer answered: *He is a murderer.*

When she saw the answer, she relaxed at once. He could find food, and show her how to reach Oxford, and those were powers that were useful, but he might still have been untrustworthy or cowardly. A murderer was a worthy companion. She felt as safe with him as she'd done with Iorek Byrnison the armoured bear.

She swung the shutter across the open window so the morning sunlight wouldn't strike in on his face, and tiptoed out.

2
Among the Witches



The witch Serafina Pekkala, who had rescued Lyra and the other children from the experimental station at Bolvangar and flown with her to the island of Svalbard, was deeply troubled.

In the atmospheric disturbances that followed Lord Asriel's escape from his exile on Svalbard, she and her companions were blown far from the island and many miles out over the frozen sea. Some of them managed to stay with the damaged balloon of Lee Scoresby, the Texan aëronaut, but Serafina herself was tossed high into the banks of fog that soon came rolling in from the gap that Lord Asriel's experiment had torn in the sky.

When she found herself able to control her flight once more, her first thought was of Lyra; for she knew nothing of the fight between the false bear-king and the true one, Iorek Byrnison, nor of what had happened to Lyra after that.

So she began to search for her, flying through the cloudy gold-tinged air on her branch of cloud-pine, accompanied by her dæmon Kaisa the snow-goose. They moved back towards Svalbard and south a little, soaring for several hours under a sky turbulent with strange lights and shadows. Serafina Pekkala knew from the unsettling tingle of the light on her skin that it came from another world.

After some time had passed, Kaisa said, "Look! A witch's dæmon, lost…"

Serafina Pekkala looked through the fog-banks and saw a tern, circling and crying in the chasms of misty light. They wheeled and flew towards him. Seeing them come near, he darted up in alarm, but Serafina Pekkala signalled friendship, and he dropped down beside them.

Serafina Pekkala said, "What clan are you from?"

"Taymyr," he told her. "My witch is captured… Our companions have been driven away! I am lost…"

"Who has captured your witch?"

"The woman with the monkey-dæmon, from Bolvangar… Help me! Help us! I am so afraid!"

"Was your clan allied with the child-cutters?"

"Yes, until we found out what they were doing… After the fight at Bolvangar they drove us off, but my witch was taken prisoner… They have her on a ship… What can I do? She is calling to me and I can't find her! Oh, help, help me!"

"Quiet," said Kaisa the goose-dæmon. "Listen down below."

They glided lower, listening with keen ears, and Serafina Pekkala soon made out the beat of a gas-engine, muffled by the fog.

"They can't navigate a ship in fog like this," Kaisa said. "What are they doing?"

"It's a smaller engine than that," said Serafina Pekkala, and as she spoke there came a new sound from a different direction: a low brutal shuddering blast, like some immense sea creature calling from the depths. It roared for several seconds and then stopped abruptly.

"The ship's foghorn," said Serafina Pekkala.

They wheeled low over the water and cast about again for the sound of the engine. Suddenly they found it, for the fog seemed

to have patches of different density, and the witch darted up out of sight just in time as a launch came chugging slowly through the swathes of damp air. The swell was slow and oily, as if the water was reluctant to rise.

They swung around and above, the tern-dæmon keeping close like a child to its mother, and watched the steersman adjust the course slightly as the foghorn boomed again. There was a light mounted on the bow, but all it lit up was the fog a few yards in front.

Serafina Pekkala said to the lost dæmon: "Did you say there are still some witches helping these people?"

"I think so – a few renegade witches from Volgorsk – unless they've fled too," he told her. "What are you going to do? Will you look for my witch?"

"Yes. But stay with Kaisa for now."

Serafina Pekkala flew down towards the launch, leaving the dæmons out of sight above, and alighted on the counter just behind the steersman. His seagull-dæmon squawked, and the man turned to look.

"You taken your time, en't you?" he said. "Get up ahead and guide us in on the port side."

She took off again at once. It had worked: they still had some witches helping them, and he thought she was one. Port was left, she remembered, and the port light was red. She cast about in the fog until she caught its hazy glow no more than a hundred yards away. She darted back and hovered above the launch calling directions to the steersman, who slowed the craft down to a crawling pace and brought it in to the gangway-ladder that hung just above the water-line. The steersman called, and a sailor threw a line from above, and another hurried down the ladder to make it fast to the launch.

Serafina Pekkala flew up to the ship's rail, and retreated to the

shadows by the lifeboats. She could see no other witches, but they were probably patrolling the skies; Kaisa would know what to do.

Below, a passenger was leaving the launch and climbing the ladder. The figure was fur-swathed, hooded, anonymous; but as it reached the deck, a golden monkey-dæmon swung himself lightly up on the rail and glared around, his black eyes radiating malevolence. Serafina caught her breath: the figure was Mrs Coulter.

A dark-clothed man hurried out on deck to greet her, and looked around as if he were expecting someone else as well.

"Lord Boreal –" he began.

But Mrs Coulter interrupted: "He has gone on elsewhere. Have they started the torture?"

"Yes, Mrs Coulter," was the reply, "but –"

"I ordered them to wait," she snapped. "Have they taken to disobeying me? Perhaps there should be more discipline on this ship."

She pushed her hood back. Serafina Pekkala saw her face clearly in the yellow light: proud, passionate, and to the witch, so young.

"Where are the other witches?" she demanded.

The man from the ship said, "All gone, ma'am. Fled to their homeland."

"But a witch guided the launch in," said Mrs Coulter. "Where has she gone?"

Serafina shrank back; obviously the sailor in the launch hadn't heard the latest state of things. The cleric looked around, bewildered, but Mrs Coulter was too impatient, and after a cursory glance above and along the deck, she shook her head and hurried in with her dæmon through the open door that cast a yellow nimbus on the air. The man followed.

Serafina Pekkala looked around to check her position. She was concealed behind a ventilator on the narrow area of decking between the rail and the central superstructure of the ship; and on this level, facing forward below the bridge and the funnel, was a saloon from which windows, not portholes, looked out on three sides. That was where the people had gone in. Light spilled thickly from the windows on to the fog-pearled railing, and dimly showed up the foremast and the canvas-covered hatch. Everything was wringing wet and beginning to freeze into stiffness. No one could see Serafina where she was; but if she wanted to see any more, she would have to leave her hiding-place.

That was too bad. With her pine branch she could escape, and with her knife and her bow she could fight. She hid the branch behind the ventilator and slipped along the deck until she reached the first window. It was fogged with condensation and impossible to see through, and Serafina could hear no voices, either. She withdrew to the shadows again.

There was one thing she could do; she was reluctant, because it was desperately risky, and it would leave her exhausted; but it seemed there was no choice. It was a kind of magic she could work to make herself unseen. True invisibility was impossible, of course: this was mental magic, a kind of fiercely-held modesty that could make the spell-worker not invisible but simply unnoticed. Holding it with the right degree of intensity she could pass through a crowded room, or walk beside a solitary traveller, without being seen.

So now she composed her mind and brought all her concentration to bear on the matter of altering the way she held herself so as to deflect attention completely. It took some minutes before she was confident. She tested it by stepping out of her hiding-place and into the path of a sailor coming along the deck

with a bag of tools. He stepped aside to avoid her without looking at her once.

She was ready. She went to the door of the brightly-lit saloon and opened it, finding the room empty. She left the outer door ajar so that she could flee through it if she needed to, and saw a door at the far end of the room that opened on to a flight of stairs leading down into the bowels of the ship. She descended, and found herself in a narrow corridor hung with white-painted pipework, and illuminated with anbaric bulkhead lights, which led straight along the length of the hull, with doors opening off it on both sides.

She walked quietly along, listening, until she heard voices. It sounded as if some kind of council was in session.

She opened the door and walked in.

A dozen or so people were seated around a large table. One or two of them looked up for a moment, gazed at her absently, and forgot her at once. She stood quietly near the door and watched. The meeting was being chaired by an elderly man in the robes of a Cardinal, and the rest of them seemed clerics of one sort or another, apart from Mrs Coulter, who was the only woman present. Mrs Coulter had thrown her furs over the back of the chair, and her cheeks were flushed in the heat of the ship's interior.

Serafina Pekkala looked around carefully, and saw someone else in the room as well: a thin-faced man with a frog-dæmon, seated to one side at a table laden with leather-bound books and loose piles of yellowed paper. She thought at first that he was a clerk or a secretary, until she saw what he was doing: he was intently gazing at a golden instrument like a large watch or a compass, stopping every minute or so to note down what he found. Then he would open one of the books, search laboriously through the index, and look up a reference before writing that

down too and turning back to the instrument.

Serafina looked back to the discussion at the table, because she heard the word *witch*.

"She knows something about the child," said one of the clerics. "She confessed that she knows something. All the witches know something about her."

"I am wondering what Mrs Coulter knows," said the Cardinal. "Is there something she should have told us before, I wonder?"

"You will have to speak more plainly than that," said Mrs Coulter icily. "You forget I am a woman, Your Eminence, and thus not so subtle as a prince of the Church. What is this truth that I should have known about the child?"

The Cardinal's expression was full of meaning, but he said nothing. There was a pause and then another cleric said almost apologetically:

"It seems that there is a prophecy. It concerns the child, you see, Mrs Coulter. All the signs have been fulfilled. The circumstances of her birth, to begin with. The gyptians know something about her too – they speak of her in terms of witch-oil and marsh-fire, uncanny, you see – hence her success in leading the gyptian men to Bolvangar. And then there's her astonishing feat of deposing the bear-king Iofur Raknison – this is no ordinary child. Fra Pavel can tell us more, perhaps…"

He glanced at the thin-faced man reading the alethiometer, who blinked, rubbed his eyes, and looked at Mrs Coulter.

"You may be aware that this is the only alethiometer left, apart from the one in the child's possession," he said. "All the others have been acquired and destroyed, by order of the Magisterium. I learn from this instrument that the child was given hers by the Master of Jordan College, and that she learned to read it by herself, and that she can use it without the books of readings. If

it were possible to disbelieve the alethiometer, I would do so, because to use the instrument without the books is simply inconceivable to me. It takes decades of diligent study to reach any sort of understanding. She began to read it within a few weeks of acquiring it, and now she has an almost complete mastery. She is like no human scholar I can imagine."

"Where is she now, Fra Pavel?" said the Cardinal.

"In the other world," said Fra Pavel. "It is already late."

"The witch knows!" said another man, whose muskrat-dæmon gnawed unceasingly at a pencil. "It's all in place but for the witch's testimony! I say we should torture her again!"

"What is this prophecy?" demanded Mrs Coulter, who had been getting increasingly angry. "How dare you keep it from me?"

Her power over them was visible. The golden monkey glared round the table, and none of them could look him in the face.

Only the Cardinal did not flinch. His dæmon, a macaw, lifted a foot and scratched her head.

"The witch has hinted at something extraordinary," the Cardinal said. "I dare not believe what I think it means. If it's true, it places on us the most terrible responsibility men and women have ever faced. But I ask you again, Mrs Coulter – what do *you* know of the child and her father?"

Mrs Coulter's face was chalk-white with fury.

"How dare you interrogate me?" she spat. "And how dare you keep from me what you've learned from the witch? And finally, how dare you assume that I am keeping something from you? D'you think I'm on her side? Or perhaps you think I'm on her father's side? Perhaps you think I should be tortured like the witch. Well, we are all under your command, Your Eminence. You have only to snap your fingers and you could have me torn apart. But if you searched every scrap of flesh for an answer you

wouldn't find one, because I know nothing of this prophecy, nothing whatever. And I demand that you tell me what *you* know. My child, my own child, conceived in sin and born in shame, but my child nonetheless, and you keep from me what I have every right to know!"

"Please," said another of the clerics nervously. "Please, Mrs Coulter; the witch hasn't spoken yet; we shall learn more from her. Cardinal Sturrock himself says that she's only hinted at it."

"And suppose the witch doesn't reveal it?" Mrs Coulter said. "What then? We guess, do we? We shiver and quail and guess?"

Fra Pavel said: "No, because that is the question I am now preparing to put to the alethiometer. We shall find the answer, whether from the witch or from the books of readings."

"And how long will that take?"

He raised his eyebrows wearily and said, "A considerable time. It is an immensely complex question."

"But the witch would tell us at once," said Mrs Coulter.

And she rose to her feet. As if in awe of her, most of the men did too. Only the Cardinal and Fra Pavel remained seated. Serafina Pekkala stood back, fiercely holding herself unseen. The golden monkey was gnashing his teeth, and all his shimmering fur was standing on end.

Mrs Coulter swung him up to her shoulder.

"So let us go and ask her," she said.

She turned and swept out into the corridor. The men hastened to follow her, jostling and shoving past Serafina Pekkala, who had only time to stand quickly aside, her mind in a turmoil. The last to go was the Cardinal.

Serafina took a few seconds to compose herself, because her agitation was beginning to make her visible. Then she followed the clerics down the corridor and into a smaller room, bare and white and hot, where they were all clustered around the dreadful

figure in the centre: a witch bound tightly to a steel chair, with agony on her grey face and her legs twisted and broken.

Mrs Coulter stood over her. Serafina took up a position by the door, knowing that she could not stay unseen for long; this was too hard.

"Tell us about the child, witch," said Mrs Coulter.

"No!"

"You will suffer."

"I have suffered enough."

"Oh, there is more suffering to come. We have a thousand years of experience in this Church of ours. We can draw out your suffering endlessly. Tell us about the child," Mrs Coulter said, and reached down to break one of the witch's fingers. It snapped easily.

The witch cried out, and for a clear second Serafina Pekkala became visible to everyone, and one or two of the clerics looked at her, puzzled and fearful; but then she controlled herself again, and they turned back to the torture.

Mrs Coulter was saying, "If you don't answer I'll break another finger, and then another. What do you know about the child? Tell me."

"All right! Please, please, no more!"

"Answer then."

There came another sickening crack, and this time a flood of sobbing broke from the witch. Serafina Pekkala could hardly hold herself back. Then came these words, in a shriek:

"No, no! I'll tell you! I beg you, no more! The child who was to come… The witches knew who she was before you did… We found out her name…"

"We know her name. What name do you mean?"

"Her true name! The name of her destiny!"

"What is this name? Tell me!" said Mrs Coulter.

"No … no…"

"And how? Found out how?"

"There was a test… If she was able to pick out one spray of cloud-pine from many others, she would be the child who would come, and it happened at our Consul's house at Trollesund, when the child came with the gyptian men… The child with the bear…"

Her voice gave out.

Mrs Coulter gave a little exclamation of impatience, and there came another loud slap, and a groan.

"But what was your prophecy about this child?" Mrs Coulter went on, and her voice was all bronze now, and ringing with passion. "And what is this name that will make her destiny clear?"

Serafina Pekkala moved closer, even among the tight throng of men around the witch, and none of them felt her presence at their very elbows. She must end this witch's suffering, and soon, but the strain of holding herself unseen was enormous. She trembled as she took the knife from her waist.

The witch was sobbing, "She is the one who came before, and you have hated and feared her ever since! Well, now she has come again, and you failed to find her… She was there on Svalbard – she was with Lord Asriel, and you lost her. She escaped, and she will be –"

But before she could finish, there came an interruption.

Through the open doorway there flew a tern, mad with terror, and it beat its wings brokenly as it crashed to the floor and struggled up and darted to the breast of the tortured witch, pressing itself against her, nuzzling, chirruping, crying, and the witch called in anguish: "Yambe-Akka! Come to me, come to me!"

No one but Serafina Pekkala understood. Yambe-Akka was the

goddess who came to a witch when she was about to die.

And Serafina was ready. She became visible at once, and stepped forward smiling happily, because Yambe-Akka was merry and light-hearted and her visits were gifts of joy. The witch saw her and turned up her tear-stained face, and Serafina bent to kiss it, and slid her knife gently into the witch's heart. The tern-dæmon looked up with dim eyes and vanished.

And now Serafina Pekkala would have to fight her way out.

The men were still shocked, disbelieving, but Mrs Coulter recovered her wits almost at once.

"Seize her! Don't let her go!" she cried, but Serafina was already at the door, with an arrow nocked in her bowstring. She swung up the bow and loosed the arrow in less than a second, and the Cardinal fell choking and kicking to the floor.

Out, along the corridor to the stairs, turn, nock, loose; and another man fell, and already a loud jarring bell was filling the ship with its clangour.

Up the stairs and out on to the deck. Two sailors barred her way, and she said, "Down there! The prisoner has got loose! Get help!"

That was enough to puzzle them, and they stood undecided, which gave her time to dodge past and seize her cloud-pine from where she had hidden it behind the ventilator.

"Shoot her!" came a cry in Mrs Coulter's voice from behind, and at once three rifles fired, and the bullets struck metal and whined off into the fog, as Serafina leapt on the branch and urged it up like one of her own arrows. A few seconds later she was in the air, in the thick of the fog, safe, and then a great goose-shape glided out of the wraiths of grey to her side.

"Where to?" he said.

"Away, Kaisa, away," she said. "I want to get the stench of these people out of my nose."

In truth, she didn't know where to go or what to do next. But there was one thing she knew for certain: there was an arrow in her quiver that would find its mark in Mrs Coulter's throat.

They turned south, away from that troubling other-world gleam in the fog, and as they flew a question began to form more clearly in Serafina's mind. What was Lord Asriel doing?

Because all the events that had overturned the world had their origin in his mysterious activities.

The problem was that the usual sources of her knowledge were natural ones. She could track any animal, catch any fish, find the rarest berries; and she could read the signs in the pine marten's entrails, or decipher the wisdom in the scales of a perch, or interpret the warnings in the crocus-pollen; but these were children of nature, and they told her natural truths.

For knowledge about Lord Asriel, she had to go elsewhere. In the port of Trollesund, their consul Dr Lanselius maintained his contact with the world of men and women, and Serafina Pekkala sped there through the fog to see what he could tell her. Before she went to his house she circled over the harbour, where wisps and tendrils of mist drifted ghostlike on the icy water, and watched as the pilot guided in a large vessel with an African registration. There were several other ships riding at anchor outside the harbour. She had never seen so many.

As the short day faded, she flew down and landed in the back garden of the consul's house. She tapped on the window, and Dr Lanselius himself opened the door, a finger to his lips.

"Serafina Pekkala, greetings," he said. "Come in quickly, and welcome. But you had better not stay long." He offered her a chair at the fireside, having glanced through the curtains out of a window that fronted the street, and said, "You'll have some wine?"

She sipped the golden Tokay and told him of what she had seen and heard aboard the ship.

"Do you think they understood what she said about the child?" he asked.

"Not fully, I think. But they know she is important. As for that woman, I'm afraid of her, Dr Lanselius. I shall kill her, I think, but still I'm afraid of her."

"Yes," he said. "So am I."

And Serafina listened as he told her of the rumours that had swept the town. Amid the fog of rumour, a few facts had begun to emerge clearly.

"They say that the Magisterium is assembling the greatest army ever known, and this is an advance party. And there are unpleasant rumours about some of the soldiers, Serafina Pekkala. I've heard about Bolvangar, and what they were doing there – cutting children's dæmons away, the most evil work I've ever heard of – well, it seems there is a regiment of warriors who have been treated in the same way. Do you know the word *zombi*? They fear nothing, because they're mindless. There are some in this town now. The authorities keep them hidden, but word gets out, and the townspeople are terrified of them."

"What of the other witch-clans?" said Serafina Pekkala. "What news do you have of them?"

"Most have gone back to their homelands. All the witches are waiting, Serafina Pekkala, with fear in their hearts, for what will happen next."

"And what do you hear of the church?"

"They're in complete confusion. You see, they don't know what Lord Asriel intends to do."

"Nor do I," she said, "and I can't imagine what it might be. What do *you* think he's intending, Dr Lanselius?"

He gently rubbed the head of his serpent-dæmon with his thumb.

"He is a scholar," he said after a moment, "but scholarship is not his ruling passion. Nor is statesmanship. I met him once, and I thought he had an ardent and powerful nature, but not a despotic one. I don't think he wants to rule… I don't know, Serafina Pekkala. I suppose his servant might be able to tell you. He is a man called Thorold, and he was imprisoned with Lord Asriel in the house on Svalbard. It might be worth a visit there to see if he can tell you anything; but of course, he might have gone into the other world with his master."

"Thank you. That's a good idea… I'll do it. And I'll go at once."

She said farewell to the consul and flew up through the gathering dark to join Kaisa in the clouds.

Serafina's journey to the north was made harder by the confusion in the world around her. All the Arctic peoples had been thrown into panic, and so had the animals, not only by the fog and the magnetic variations but by unseasonal crackings of ice and stirrings in the soil. It was as if the earth itself, the permafrost, were slowly awakening from a long dream of being frozen.

In all this turmoil, where sudden shafts of uncanny brilliance lanced down through rents in towers of fog and then vanished as quickly, where herds of musk-ox were seized by the urge to gallop south and then wheeled immediately to the west or the north again, where tight-knit skeins of geese disintegrated into a honking chaos as the magnetic fields they flew by wavered and snapped this way and that, Serafina Pekkala set her cloud-pine and flew north, to the house on the headland in the wastes of Svalbard.

There she found Lord Asriel's servant Thorold fighting off a group of cliff-ghasts.

She saw the movement before she came close enough to see what was happening. A swirl of lunging leathery wings, and a malevolent *yowk-yowk-yowk* resounding in the snowy courtyard; and a single figure swathed in furs, firing a rifle into the midst of them with a gaunt dog-dæmon snarling and snapping beside him whenever one of the filthy things flew low enough.

She didn't know the man, but a cliff-ghast was an enemy always. She swung round above and loosed a dozen arrows into the mêlée. With shrieks and gibberings the gang – too loosely organized to be called a troop – circled, saw their new opponent, and fled in confusion. A minute later the skies were bare again, and their dismayed *yowk-yowk-yowk* echoed distantly off the mountains before dwindling into silence.

Serafina flew down to the courtyard and alighted on the trampled, blood-sprinkled snow. The man pushed his hood back, still holding his rifle warily, because a witch was an enemy sometimes, and she saw an elderly man, long-jawed and grizzled and steady-eyed.

"I am a friend of Lyra's," she said. "I hope we can talk. Look: I lay my bow down."

"Where is the child?" he said.

"In another world. I'm concerned for her safety. And I need to know what Lord Asriel is doing."

He lowered the rifle and said, "Step inside, then. Look: I lay my rifle down."

The formalities exchanged, they went indoors. Kaisa glided through the skies above, keeping watch, while Thorold brewed some coffee and Serafina told him of her involvement with Lyra.

"She was always a wilful child," he said when they were seated at the oaken table in the glow of a naphtha lamp. "I'd see her

every year or so when his lordship visited his college. I was fond of her, mind, you couldn't help it. But what her place was in the wider scheme of things, I don't know."

"What was Lord Asriel planning to do?"

"You don't think he told me, do you, Serafina Pekkala? I'm his manservant, that's all. I clean his clothes and cook his meals and keep his house tidy. I may have learned a thing or two in the years I been with his lordship, but only by picking 'em up accidental. He wouldn't confide in me any more than in his shaving-mug."

"Then tell me the thing or two you've learned by accident," she insisted.

Thorold was an elderly man, but he was healthy and vigorous, and he felt flattered by the attention of this young witch and her beauty, as any man would. He was shrewd, though, too, and he knew the attention was not really on him, but on what he knew; and he was honest, so he did not draw out his telling for much longer than he needed.

"I can't tell you precisely what he's doing," he said, "because all the philosophical details are beyond my grasp. But I can tell you what drives his lordship, though he doesn't know I know. I've seen this in a hundred little signs. Correct me if I'm wrong, but the witch-people have different gods from ours, en't that right?"

"Yes, that's true."

"But you know about our God? The God of the church, the one they call the Authority?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, Lord Asriel has never found hisself at ease in the doctrines of the church, so to speak. I've seen a spasm of disgust cross his face when they talk of the sacraments, and atonement, and redemption, and suchlike. It's death among our people, Serafina Pekkala, to challenge the church, but Lord Asriel's been

nursing a rebellion in his heart for as long as I've served him, that's one thing I do know."

"A rebellion against the church?"

"Partly, aye. There was a time when he thought of making it an issue of force, but he turned away from that."

"Why? Was the church too strong?"

"No," said the old servant, "that wouldn't stop my master. Now this might sound strange to you, Serafina Pekkala, but I know the man better than any wife could know him, better than a mother. He's been my master and my study for nigh on forty years. I can't follow him to the height of his thought any more than I can fly, but I can see where he's a-heading even if I can't go after him. No, it's my belief he turned away from a rebellion against the church not because the church was too strong, but because it was too weak to be worth the fighting."

"So … what is he doing?"

"I think he's a-waging a higher war than that. I think he's aiming a rebellion against the highest power of all. He's gone a-searching for the dwelling place of the Authority Himself, and he's a-going to destroy Him. That's what I think. It shakes my heart to voice it, ma'am. I hardly dare think of it. But I can't put together any other story that makes sense of what he's doing."

Serafina sat quiet for a few moments, absorbing what Thorold had said.

Before she could speak, he went on:

"Course, anyone setting out to do a grand thing like that would be the target of the church's anger. Goes without saying. It'd be the most gigantic blasphemy, that's what they'd say. They'd have him before the Consistorial Court and sentenced to death before you could blink. I've never spoke of it before and I shan't again; I'd be afraid to speak it aloud to you if you weren't a witch and beyond the power of the church; but that makes

sense, and nothing else does. He's a-going to find the Authority and kill Him."

"Is that possible?" said Serafina.

"Lord Asriel's life has been filled with things that were impossible. I wouldn't like to say there was anything he couldn't do. But on the face of it, Serafina Pekkala, yes, he's stark mad. If angels couldn't do it, how can a man dare to think about it?"

"Angels? What are angels?"

"Beings of pure spirit, the church says. The church teaches that some of the angels rebelled before the world was created, and got flung out of heaven and into hell. They failed, you see, that's the point. They couldn't do it. And they had the power of angels. Lord Asriel is just a man, with human power, no more than that. But his ambition is limitless. He dares to do what men and women don't even dare to think. And look what he's done already: he's torn open the sky, he's opened the way to another world. Who else has ever done that? Who else could think of it? So with one part of me, Serafina Pekkala, I say he's mad, wicked, deranged. Yet with another part I think, he's Lord Asriel, he's not like other men. Maybe… If it was ever going to be possible, it'd be done by him and by no one else."

"And what will you do, Thorold?"

"I'll stay here and wait. I'll guard this house till he comes back and tells me different, or till I die. And now I might ask you the same question, ma'am."

"I'm going to make sure the child is safe," she said. "It might be that I have to pass this way again, Thorold. I'm glad to know that you will still be here."

"I won't budge," he told her.

She refused Thorold's offer of food, and said goodbye.

A minute or so later she joined her goose-dæmon again, and the dæmon kept silence with her as they soared and wheeled above the

foggy mountains. She was deeply troubled, and there was no need to explain: every strand of moss, every icy puddle, every midge in her homeland thrilled against her nerves and called her back. She felt fear for them, but fear for herself too, for she was having to change; these were human affairs she was inquiring into, this was a human matter; Lord Asriel's god was not hers. Was she becoming human? Was she losing her witch-hood?

If she were, she could not do it alone.

"Home now," she said. "We must talk to our sisters, Kaisa. These events are too big for us alone."

And they sped through the roiling banks of fog towards Lake Enara, and home.

In the forested caves beside the lake they found the others of their clan, and Lee Scoresby, too. The aëronaut had struggled to keep his balloon aloft after the crash of Svalbard, and the witches had guided him to their homeland, where he had begun to repair the damage to his basket and the gas-bag.

"Ma'am, I'm very glad to see you," he said. "Any news of the little girl?"

"None, Mr Scoresby. Will you join our council tonight and help us discuss what to do?"

The Texan blinked with surprise, for no man had ever been known to join a witch-council.

"I'd be greatly honoured," he said. "I may have a suggestion or two of my own."

All through that day the witches came, like flakes of black snow on the wings of a storm, filling the skies with the darting flutter of their silk and the swish of air through the needles of their cloud-pine branches. Men who hunted in the dripping forests or fished among melting ice-floes heard the sky-wide whisper through the fog, and if the sky was clear they would look up to see the witches flying, like

scraps of darkness drifting on a secret tide.

By evening the pines around the lake were lit from below by a hundred fires, and the greatest fire of all was built in front of the gathering-cave. There, once they had eaten, the witches assembled. Serafina Pekkala sat in the centre, the crown of little scarlet flowers nestling among her fair hair. On her left sat Lee Scoresby, and on her right, a visitor: the queen of the Latvian witches, whose name was Ruta Skadi.

She had arrived only an hour before, to Serafina's surprise. Serafina had thought Mrs Coulter beautiful, for a short-life; but Ruta Skadi was as lovely as Mrs Coulter, with an extra dimension of the mysterious, the uncanny. She had trafficked with spirits, and it showed. She was vivid and passionate, with large black eyes; it was said that Lord Asriel himself had been her lover. She wore heavy gold earrings and a crown on her black curly hair ringed with the fangs of snow-tigers. Serafina's dæmon Kaisa had learned from Ruta Skadi's dæmon that she had killed the tigers herself in order to punish the Tartar tribe who worshipped them, because the tribesmen had failed to do her honour when she had visited their territory. Without their tiger-gods the tribe declined into fear and melancholy, and begged her to allow them to worship her instead, only to be rejected with contempt; for what good would their worship do her, she asked? It had done nothing for the tigers. Such was Ruta Skadi: beautiful, proud and pitiless.

Serafina was not sure why she had come, but she made her welcome, and etiquette demanded that she should sit on Serafina's right. When they were all assembled, Serafina began to speak.

"Sisters! You know why we have come together: we must decide what to do about these new events. The universe is broken wide, and Lord Asriel has opened the way from this world to



another. Should we concern ourselves with it, or live our lives as we have done until now, looking after our own affairs? Then there is the matter of the child Lyra Belacqua, now called Lyra Silvertongue by King Iorek Byrnison. She chose the right cloud-pine spray at the house of Dr Lanselius: she is the child we have always expected, and now she has vanished.

"We have two guests, who will tell us their thoughts. First we shall hear Queen Ruta Skadi."

Ruta Skadi stood. Her white arms gleamed in the firelight, her eyes glittered so brightly that even the furthest witch could see the play of expression on her vivid face.

"Sisters," she began, "let me tell you what is happening, and who it is that we must fight. For there is a war coming. I don't know who will join with us, but I know whom we must fight. It is the Magisterium, the church. For all its history – and that's not long by our lives, but it's many, many of theirs – it's tried to suppress and control every natural impulse. And when it can't control them, it cuts them out. Some of you have seen what they did at Bolvangar. And that was horrible, but it is not the only such place, not the only such practice. Sisters, you know only the north: I have travelled in the south lands. There are churches there, believe me, that cut their children too, as the people of Bolvangar did – not in the same way, but just as horribly – they cut their sexual organs, yes, both boys and girls – they cut them with knives so that they shan't feel. That is what the church does, and every church is the same: control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling. So if a war comes, and the church is on one side of it, we must be on the other, no matter what strange allies we find ourselves bound to.

"What I propose is that our clans join together and go north to explore this new world, and see what we can discover there. If the child is not to be found in our world, it's because she will

have gone after Lord Asriel already. And Lord Asriel is the key to this, believe me. He was my lover once, and I would willingly join forces with him, because he hates the church and all it does.

"That is what I have to say."

Ruta Skadi spoke passionately, and Serafina admired her power and her beauty. When the Latvian queen sat down, Serafina turned to Lee Scoresby.

"Mr Scoresby is a friend of the child's, and thus a friend of ours," she said. "Would you tell us your thoughts, sir?"

The Texan got to his feet, whiplash-lean and courteous. He looked as if he were not conscious of the strangeness of the occasion, but he was. His hare-dæmon Hester crouched beside him, her ears flat along her back, her golden eyes half-closed.

"Ma'am," he said, "I have to thank you all first for the kindness you've shown to me, and the help you extended to an aëronaut battered by winds that came from another world. I won't trespass long on your patience.

"When I was travelling north to Bolvangar with the gyptians, the child Lyra told me about something that happened in the college she used to live in, back in Oxford. Lord Asriel had shown the other scholars the severed head of a man called Stanislaus Grumman, and that kinda persuaded them to give him some money to come north and find out what had happened.

"Now the child was so sure of what she'd seen that I didn't like to question her too much. But what she said made a kind of memory come to my mind, except that I couldn't reach it clearly. I knew something about this Dr Grumman. And it was only on the flight here from Svalbard that I remembered what it was. It was an old hunter from Tungusk who told me. It seems that Grumman knew the whereabouts of some kind of object that gives protection to whoever holds it. I don't want to belittle the magic that you

witches can command, but this thing, whatever it is, has a kind of power that outclasses anything I've ever heard of.

"And I thought I might postpone my retirement to Texas, because of my concern for that child, and search for Dr Grumman. You see, I don't think he's dead. I think Lord Asriel was fooling those scholars.

"So I'm going to Nova Zembla, where I last heard of him alive, and I'm going to search for him. I cain't see the future, but I can see the present clear enough. And I'm with you in this war, for what my bullets are worth. But that's the task I'm going to take on, ma'am," he concluded, turning back to Serafina Pekkala: "I'm going to seek out Stanislaus Grumman, and find out what he knows, and if I can find that object he knows of, I'll take it to Lyra."

Serafina said, "Have you been married, Mr Scoresby? Have you any children?"

"No, ma'am, I have no child, though I would have liked to be a father. But I understand your question, and you're right: that little girl has had bad luck with her true parents, and maybe I can make it up to her. Someone has to do it, and I'm willing."

"Thank you, Mr Scoresby," she said.

And she took off her crown, and plucked from it one of the little scarlet flowers that, while she wore them, remained as fresh as if they had just been picked.

"Take this with you," she said, "and whenever you need my help, hold it in your hand and call to me. I shall hear you, wherever you are."

"Why, thank you, ma'am," he said, surprised. He took the little flower and tucked it carefully into his breast pocket.

"And we shall call up a wind to help you to Nova Zembla," Serafina Pekkala told him. "Now, sisters, who would like to speak?"

The council proper began. The witches were democratic, up to a point; every witch, even the youngest, had the right to speak, but only their queen had the power to decide. The talk lasted all night, with many passionate voices for open war at once, and some others urging caution, and a few, though those were the wisest, suggesting a mission to all the other witch-clans to urge them to join together for the first time.

Ruta Skadi agreed with that, and Serafina sent out messengers at once. As for what they should do immediately, Serafina picked out twenty of her finest fighters and ordered them to prepare to fly north with her, into the new world that Lord Asriel had opened, and search for Lyra.

"What of you, Queen Ruta Skadi?" Serafina said finally. "What are your plans?"

"I shall search for Lord Asriel, and learn what he's doing from his own lips. And it seems that the way he's gone is northwards too. May I come the first part of the journey with you, sister?"

"You may, and welcome," said Serafina, who was glad to have her company.

So they agreed.

But soon after the council had broken up, an elderly witch came to Serafina Pekkala and said, "You had better listen to what Juta Kamainen has to say, Queen. She's headstrong, but it might be important."

The young witch Juta Kamainen – young by witch standards, that is; she was only just over a hundred years old – was stubborn and embarrassed, and her robin-dæmon was agitated, flying from her shoulder to her hand and circling high above her before settling again briefly on her shoulder. The witch's cheeks were plump and red; she had a vivid and passionate nature. Serafina didn't know her very well.

"Queen," said the young witch, unable to stay silent under

Serafina's gaze, "I know the man Stanislaus Grumman. I used to love him. But I hate him now with such a fervour that if I see him, I shall kill him. I would have said nothing, but my sister made me tell you."

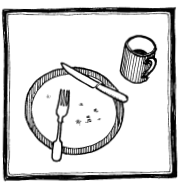
She glanced with hatred at the elder witch, who returned her look with compassion: she knew about love.

"Well," said Serafina, "if he is still alive, he'll have to stay alive until Mr Scoresby finds him. You had better come with us into the new world, and then there'll be no danger of your killing him first. Forget him, Juta Kamainen. Love makes us suffer. But this task of ours is greater than revenge. Remember that."

"Yes, Queen," said the young witch humbly.

And Serafina Pekkala and her twenty-one companions and Queen Ruta Skadi of Latvia prepared to fly into the new world, where no witch had ever flown before.

3
A Children's World



Lyra was awake early. She'd had a horrible dream: she had been given the vacuum flask she'd seen her father Lord Asriel show to the Master and Scholars of Jordan College.

When that had really happened, Lyra had been hiding in the wardrobe, and she'd watched as Lord Asriel opened the flask to show the Scholars the severed head of Stanislaus Grumman the lost explorer; but in her dream, Lyra had to open the flask herself, and she didn't want to. In fact she was terrified. But she had to do it, whether she wanted to or not, and she felt her hands weakening with dread as she unclipped the lid, and heard the air rush into the frozen chamber. Then she lifted the lid away, nearly choking with fear, but knowing she had to, she had to do it. And there was nothing inside. The head had gone. There was nothing to be afraid of.

But she awoke all the same, crying and sweating, in the hot little bedroom facing the harbour, with the moonlight streaming through the window, and lay in someone else's bed clutching someone else's pillow, with the ermine-Pantalaimon nuzzling her and making soothing noises. Oh, she was so frightened! And how odd it was, that in real life she had been eager to see the head of Stanislaus Grumman, and begged Lord Asriel to open the flask

again and let her look, and yet in her dream she was so terrified.

When morning came she asked the alethiometer what the dream meant, but all it said was *It was a dream about a head*.

She thought of waking the strange boy, but he was so deeply asleep that she decided not to. Instead she went down to the kitchen and tried to make an omelette, and twenty minutes later she sat down at a table on the pavement and ate the blackened, gritty thing with great pride while the sparrow-Pantalaimon pecked at the bits of shell.

She heard a sound behind her, and there was Will, heavy-eyed with sleep.

"I can make omelette," she said. "I'll make you some if you like."

He looked at her plate and said, "No, I'll have some cereal. There's still some milk in the fridge that's all right. They can't have been gone very long, the people who lived here."

She watched him shake corn flakes into a bowl and pour milk on them: something else she'd never seen before.

He carried the bowl outside and said, "If you don't come from this world, where's your world? How did you get here?"

"Over a bridge. My father made this bridge, and … I followed him across. But he's gone somewhere else, I don't know where. I don't care. But while I was walking across there was so much fog, and I got lost, I think. I walked around in the fog for days just eating berries and stuff I found. Then one day the fog cleared and we was up on that cliff back there –"

She gestured behind her. Will looked along the shore, past the lighthouse, and saw the coast rising in a great series of cliffs that disappeared into the haze of the distance.

"And we saw the town here, and came down, but there was no one here. At least there were things to eat and beds to sleep in. We didn't know what to do next."



"You sure this isn't another part of your world?"

"Course. This en't my world, I know that for certain."

Will remembered his own absolute certainty, on seeing the patch of grass through the window in the air, that it wasn't in his world, and he nodded.

"So there's three worlds at least that are joined on," he said.

"There's millions and millions," Lyra said. "This other dæmon told me. He was a witch's dæmon. No one can count how many worlds there are, all in the same space, but no one could get from one to another before my father made this bridge."

"What about the window I found?"

"I dunno about that. Maybe all the worlds are starting to move into one another."

"And why are you looking for dust?"

She looked at him coldly. "I might tell you some time," she said.

"All right. But how are you going to look for it?"

"I'm going to find a scholar who knows about it."

"What, any scholar?"

"No. An experimental theologian," she said. "In my Oxford, they were the ones who knew about it. Stands to reason it'll be the same in your Oxford. I'll go to Jordan College first, because Jordan had the best ones."

"I never heard of experimental theology," he said.

"They know all about elementary particles and fundamental forces," she explained. "And anbaromagnetism, stuff like that. Atomcraft."

"What-magnetism?"

"Anbaromagnetism. Like anbaric. Those lights," she said, pointing up at the ornamental street light, "they're anbaric."

"We call them electric."

"Electric… That's like electrum. That's a kind of stone, a

jewel, made out of gum from trees. There's insects in it, sometimes."

"You mean amber," he said, and they both said, "Anbar…"

And each of them saw their own expression on the other's face. Will remembered that moment for a long time afterwards.

"Well, electromagnetism," he went on, looking away. "Sounds like what we call physics, your experimental theology. You want scientists, not theologians."

"Ah," she said warily. "I'll find 'em."

They sat in the wide clear morning, with the sun glittering placidly on the harbour, and each of them might have spoken next, because they were both burning with questions; but then they heard a voice from further along the harbour front, towards the casino gardens.

They both looked there, startled. It was a child's voice, but there was no one in sight.

Will said to Lyra quietly, "How long did you say you'd been here?"

"Three days, four, I lost count. I never seen anyone. There's no one here. I looked almost everywhere."

But there was. Two children, one a girl of Lyra's age and the other a younger boy, came out of one of the streets leading down to the harbour. They were carrying baskets, and they both had red hair. They were about a hundred yards away when they saw Will and Lyra at the café table.

Pantalaimon changed from a goldfinch to a mouse and ran up Lyra's arm to the pocket of her shirt. He'd seen that these new children were like Will: neither of them had a dæmon visible.

The two children wandered up and sat at a table nearby.

"You from Ci'gazze?" the girl said.

Will shook his head.

"From Sant'Elia?"

"No," said Lyra. "We're from somewhere else."

The girl nodded. This was a reasonable reply.

"What's happening?" said Will. "Where are the grown-ups?"

The girl's eyes narrowed. "Didn't the Spectres come to your city?" she said.

"No," Will said. "We just got here. We don't know about Spectres. What is this city called?"

"Ci'gazze," the girl said suspiciously. "Cittàgazze, all right."

"Cittàgazze," Lyra repeated. "Ci'gazze. Why do the grown-ups have to leave?"

"Because of the Spectres," the girl said with weary scorn. "What's your name?"

"Lyra. And he's Will. What's yours?"

"Angelica. My brother is Paolo."

"Where've you come from?"

"Up the hills. There was a big fog and storm and everyone was frightened, so we all run up in the hills. Then when the fog cleared the grown-ups could see with telescopes that the city was full of Spectres, so they couldn't come back. But the kids, we ain afraid of Spectres, all right. There's more kids coming down. They be here later, but we're first."

"Us and Tullio," said little Paolo proudly.

"Who's Tullio?"

Angelica was cross: Paolo shouldn't have mentioned him; but the secret was out now.

"Our big brother," she said. "He ain with us. He's hiding till he can… He's just hiding."

"He's gonna get –" Paolo began, but Angelica smacked him hard, and he shut his mouth at once, pressing his quivering lips together.

"What did you say about the city?" said Will. "It's full of Spectres?"

"Yeah, Ci'gazze, Sant'Elia, all cities, the Spectres go where the people are. Where you from?"

"Winchester," said Will.

"I never heard of it. They ain got Spectres there?"

"No. I can't see any here either."

"Course not!" she crowed. "You ain grown up! When we grow up we see Spectres."

"I ain afraid of Spectres, all right," the little boy said, thrusting forward his grubby chin. "Kill the buggers."

"En't the grown-ups going to come back at all?" said Lyra.

"Yeah, in a few days," said Angelica. "When the Spectres go somewhere else. We like it when the Spectres come, 'cause we can run about in the city, do what we like, all right."

"But what do the grown-ups think the Spectres will do to them?" Will said.

"Well, when a Spectre catch a grown-up, that's bad to see. They eat the life out of them there and then, all right. I don't want to be grown-up, for sure. At first they know it's happening, and they're afraid, they cry and cry, they try and look away and pretend it ain happening, but it is. It's too late. And no one ain gonna go near them, they on they own. Then they get pale and they stop moving. They still alive, but it's like they been eaten out from inside. You look in they eyes, you see the back of they heads. Ain nothing there."

The girl turned to her brother and wiped his nose on the sleeve of his shirt.

"Me and Paolo's going to look for ice creams," she said. "You want to come and find some?"

"No," said Will, "we got something else to do."

"Goodbye, then," she said, and Paolo said, "Kill the Spectres!"

"Goodbye," said Lyra.

As soon as Angelica and the little boy had vanished, Pantalaimon appeared from Lyra's pocket, his mouse-head ruffled and bright-eyed.

He said to Will, "They don't know about this window you found."

It was the first time Will had heard him speak, and he was almost more startled by that than by anything else he'd seen so far. Lyra laughed at his astonishment.

"He – but he spoke – do all dæmons talk?" Will said.

"Course they do!" said Lyra. "Did you think he was just a *pet*?"

Will rubbed his hair and blinked. Then he shook his head. "No," he said, addressing Pantalaimon. "You're right, I think. They don't know about it."

"So we'd better be careful how we go through," Pantalaimon said.

It was only strange for a moment, talking to a mouse. Then it was no more strange than talking into a telephone, because he was really talking to Lyra. But the mouse was separate; there was something of Lyra in his expression, but something else too. It was too hard to work out, when there were so many strange things happening at once. Will tried to bring his thoughts together.

"You got to find some clothes first," he said to Lyra, "before you go into my Oxford."

"Why?" she said stubbornly.

"Because you can't go and talk to people in my world looking like that, they wouldn't let you near them. You got to look as if you fit in. You got to go about camouflaged. I *know*, see. I've been doing it for years. You better listen to me or you'll get caught, and if they find out where you come from, and the window, and everything… Well, this is a good hiding-place, this world. See,

I'm… I got to hide from some men. This is the best hiding-place I could dream of, and I don't want it found out. So I don't want you giving it away by looking out of place or as if you don't belong. I got my own things to do in Oxford, and if you give me away, I'll kill you."

She swallowed. The alethiometer never lied: this boy was a murderer, and if he'd killed before, he could kill her too. She nodded seriously, and she meant it.

"All right," she said.

Pantalaimon had become a lemur, and was gazing at him with disconcerting wide eyes. Will stared back, and the dæmon became a mouse once more and crept into her pocket.

"Good," he said. "Now while we're here, we'll pretend to these other kids that we just come from somewhere in their world. It's good there aren't any grown-ups about. We can just come and go and no one'll notice. But in my world, you got to do as I say. And the first thing is you better wash yourself. You need to look clean, or you'll stand out. We got to be camouflaged everywhere we go. We got to look as if we belong there so naturally that people don't even notice us. So go and wash your hair for a start. There's some shampoo in the bathroom. Then we'll go and find some different clothes."

"I dunno how," she said. "I never washed my hair. The housekeeper done it at Jordan, and then I never needed to after that."

"Well, you'll just have to work it out," he said. "Wash yourself all over. In my world people are clean."

"H'mm," said Lyra, and went upstairs. A ferocious rat-face glared at him over her shoulder, but he looked back coldly.

Part of him wanted to wander about this sunny silent morning exploring the city, and another part trembled with anxiety for his mother, and another part was still numb with shock at the death he'd caused. And overhanging them all there was the task he had

to do. But it was good to keep busy, so while he waited for Lyra he cleaned the working surfaces in the kitchen, and washed the floor, and emptied the rubbish into the bin he found in the alley outside.

Then he took the green leather writing-case from his shopping bag and looked at it longingly. As soon as he'd shown Lyra how to get through the window into his Oxford, he'd come back and look at what was inside; but in the meanwhile, he tucked it under the mattress of the bed he'd slept in. In this world, it was safe.

When Lyra came down, clean and wet, they left to look for some clothes for her. They found a department store, shabby like everywhere else, with clothes in styles that looked a little old-fashioned to Will's eye, but they found Lyra a tartan skirt and a green sleeveless blouse with a pocket for Pantalaimon. She refused to wear jeans: refused even to believe Will when he told her that most girls did.

"They're trousers," she said. "I'm a girl. Don't be stupid."

He shrugged; the tartan skirt looked unremarkable, which was the main thing. Before they left, Will dropped some coins in the till behind the counter.

"What you doing?" she said.

"Paying. You have to pay for things. Don't they pay for things in your world?"

"They don't in this one! I bet those other kids en't paying for a thing."

"They might not, but I do."

"If you start behaving like a grown-up, the Spectres'll get you," she said, but she didn't know whether she could tease him yet, or whether she should be afraid of him.

In the daylight, Will could see how ancient the buildings in the heart of the city were, and how near to ruin some of them had

come. Holes in the road had not been repaired; windows were broken, plaster was peeling. And yet there had once been a beauty and grandeur about this place: through carved archways they could see spacious courtyards filled with greenery, and there were great buildings that looked like palaces, for all that the steps were cracked and the door frames loose from the walls. It looked as if rather than knock a building down and build a new one, the citizens of Ci'gazze preferred to patch it up indefinitely.

At one point they came to a tower standing on its own in a little square. It was the oldest building they'd seen: a simple battlemented tower four storeys high. Something about its stillness in the bright sun was intriguing, and both Will and Lyra felt drawn to the half-open door at the top of the broad steps; but they didn't speak of it, and they went half-reluctantly on.

When they reached the broad boulevard with the palm trees, he told her to look for a little café on a corner, with green-painted metal tables on the pavement outside. She found it within a minute. It looked smaller and shabbier by daylight, but it was the same place, with the zinc-topped bar, the espresso machine, the half-finished plate of risotto, now beginning to smell bad in the warm air.

"Is it in here?" she said.

"No. It's in the middle of the road. Make sure there's no other kids around…"

But they were alone. Will took her to the central reservation under the palm trees, and looked around to get his bearings.

"I think it was about here," he said. "When I came through I could just about see that big hill behind the white house up there, and looking this way there was the café there, and…"

"What's it look like? I can't see anything."

"You won't mistake it. It doesn't look like anything you've ever seen."

He cast up and down. Had it vanished? Had it closed? He couldn't see it anywhere.

And then suddenly he had it. He moved back and forth, watching the edge. Just as he'd found the night before, on the Oxford side of it, you could only see it at all from one side: when you moved behind it, it was invisible. And the sun on the grass beyond it was just like the sun on the grass on this side, except unaccountably different.

"Here it is," he said, when he was sure.

"Ah! I see it!"

She was agog: she looked as astounded as he'd looked himself to hear Pantalaimon talk. Her dæmon, unable to remain inside her pocket, had come out to be a wasp, and he buzzed up to the hole and back several times, while she rubbed her still slightly wet hair into spikes.

"Keep to one side," he told her. "If you stand in front of it people'd just see a pair of legs, and that *would* make 'em curious. I don't want anyone noticing."

"What's that noise?"

"Traffic. It's part of the Oxford ring road. It's bound to be busy. Get down and look at it from the side. It's the wrong time of day to go through, really, there's far too many people about. But it'd be hard to find somewhere to go if we went through in the middle of the night. At least once we're through we can blend in easy. You go through first. Just duck through quickly and then move away from the window."

She had a little blue rucksack that she'd been carrying since they left the café, and she unslung it and held it in her arms before crouching to look through.

"Ah –" she gasped. "And that's your world? That don't look like any part of Oxford. You sure you was in Oxford?"

"Course I'm sure. When you go through, you'll see a road

right in front of you. Go to the left, and then a little further along you take the road that goes down to the right. That leads to the city centre. Make sure you can see where this window is, and remember, all right? It's the only way back."

"Right," she said. "I won't forget."

Taking her rucksack in her arms, she ducked through the window in the air and vanished. Will crouched down to see where she went.

And there she was, standing on the grass in his Oxford with Pan still as a wasp on her shoulder, and no one, as far as he could tell, had seen her appear. Cars and trucks raced past a few feet beyond, and no driver, at this busy junction, would have time to gaze sideways at an odd-looking bit of air, even if they could see it, and the traffic screened the window from anyone looking across from the far side.

There was a squeal of brakes, a shout, a bang. He flung himself down to look.

Lyra was lying on the grass. A car had braked so hard that a van had struck it from behind, and knocked the car forward anyway, and there was Lyra, lying still –

Will darted through after her. No one saw him come; all eyes were on the car, the crumpled bumper, the van driver getting out, and on the little girl.

"I couldn't help it – she ran out in front –" said the car driver, a middle-aged woman. "*You* were too close," she said, rounding on the van driver.

"Never mind that," he said, "how's the kid?"

The van driver was addressing Will, who was on his knees beside Lyra. Will looked up and around, but there was nothing for it; he was responsible. On the grass next to him, Lyra was moving her head about, blinking hard. Will saw the wasp-Pantalaimon crawling dazedly up a grass stem beside her.



"You all right?" Will said. "Move your legs and arms."

"Stupid!" said the woman from the car. "Just ran out in front. Didn't look once. What am I supposed to do?"

"You still there, love?" said the van driver.

"Yeah," muttered Lyra.

"Everything working?"

"Move your feet and hands," Will insisted.

She did. There was nothing broken.

"She's all right," said Will, "I'll look after her. She's fine."

"D'you know her?" said the truck driver.

"She's my sister," said Will. "It's all right. We just live round the corner. I'll take her home."

Lyra was sitting up now, and as she was obviously not badly hurt, the woman turned her attention back to the car. The rest of the traffic was moving around the two stationary vehicles, and as they went past the drivers looked curiously at the little scene, as people always do. Will helped Lyra up: the sooner they moved away, the better. The woman and the van driver had realized that their argument ought to be handled by their insurance companies, and were exchanging addresses, when the woman saw Will helping Lyra to limp away.

"Wait!" she called. "You'll be witnesses. I need your name and address."

"I'm Mark Ransom," said Will, turning back, "and my sister's Lisa. We live at 26 Bourne Close."

"Postcode?"

"I can never remember," he said. "Look, I want to get her home."

"Hop in the cab," said the van driver, "and I'll take you round."

"No, it's no trouble, it'd be quicker to walk, honest."

Lyra wasn't limping badly. She walked away with Will, back

along the grass under the hornbeam trees, and turned around the first corner they came to.

They sat on a low garden wall.

"You hurt?" Will said.

"Banged me leg. And when I fell down it shook me head," she said.

But she was more concerned about what was in the rucksack. She felt inside it and brought out a heavy little bundle wrapped in black velvet and unfolded it. Will's eyes widened to see the alethiometer: the tiny symbols painted around the face, the golden hands, the questing needle, the heavy richness of the case took his breath away.

"What's that?" he said.

"It's my alethiometer. It's a truth-teller. A symbol-reader. I hope it en't broken…"

But it was unharmed. Even in her trembling hands the long needle swung steadily. She put it away and said, "I never seen so many carts and things… I never guessed they was going so fast."

"They don't have cars and vans in your Oxford?"

"Not so many. Not like these ones. I wasn't used to it. But I'm all right now."

"Well be careful from now on. If you go and walk under a bus or get lost or something, they'll realize you're not from this world, and start looking for the way through…"

He was far more angry than he needed to be. Finally he said:

"All right, look. If you pretend you're my sister, that'll be a disguise for me, because the person they're looking for hasn't got a sister. And if I'm with you I can show you how to cross roads without getting killed."

"All right," she said humbly.

"And money. I bet you haven't – well, how could you have any money? How are you going to get around and eat and so on?"



"I have got money," she said, and shook some gold coins out of her purse.

Will looked at them incredulously.

"Is that gold? It is, isn't it? Well, that would get people asking questions, and no mistake. You're just not safe. I'll give you some money. Put those coins away and keep them out of sight. And remember – you're my sister, and your name's Lisa Ransom."

"Lizzie. I pretended to call myself Lizzie before. I can remember that."

"All right, Lizzie then. And I'm Mark. Don't forget."

"All right," she said peaceably.

Her leg was going to be painful; already it was red and swollen where the car had struck it, and a dark massive bruise was forming. What with the bruise on her cheek where he'd struck her the night before, she looked as if she'd been badly treated, and that worried him too: suppose some police officer should become curious?

He tried to put it out of his mind, and they set off together, crossing at the traffic lights and casting just one glance back at the window under the hornbeam trees. They couldn't see it at all. It was quite invisible, and the traffic was flowing again.

In Summertown, ten minutes' walk down the Banbury Road, Will stopped in front of a bank.

"What are you doing?" said Lyra.

"I'm going to get some money. I probably better not do it too often, but they won't register it till the end of the working day, I shouldn't think."

He put his mother's bank card into the automatic dispenser and tapped out her PIN number. Nothing seemed to be going wrong, so he withdrew a hundred pounds, and the machine gave it up without a hitch. Lyra watched open-mouthed. He gave her a twenty-pound note.



"Use that later," he said. "Buy something and get some change. Let's find a bus into town."

Lyra let him deal with the bus, and sat very quiet, watching the houses and gardens of the city that was hers and not hers. It was like being in someone else's dream. They got off in the city centre next to an old stone church, which she did know, opposite a big department store which she didn't.

"It's all changed," she said. "Like… That en't the Corn-market? And this is the Broad. There's Balliol. And Bodley's Library, down there. But where's Jordan?"

Now she was trembling badly. It might have been delayed reaction from the accident, or present shock from finding an entirely different building in place of the Jordan College she knew as home.

"That en't right," she said. She spoke quietly, because Will had told her to stop pointing out so loudly the things that were wrong. "This is a different Oxford."

"Well, we knew that," he said.

He wasn't prepared for Lyra's wide-eyed helplessness. He couldn't know how much of her childhood had been spent running about streets almost identical with these, and how proud she'd been of belonging to Jordan College, whose scholars were the cleverest, whose coffers the richest, whose beauty the most splendid of all; and now it simply wasn't there, and she wasn't Lyra of Jordan any more; she was a lost little girl in a strange world, belonging nowhere.

"Well," she said shakily. "If it en't there…"

It was going to take longer than she'd thought, that was all.