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Opening extract from

Lyra's Oxford

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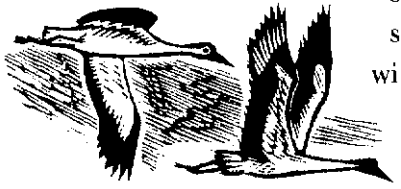
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LYRA didn't often climb out of her bedroom window these days. She had a better way on to the roof of Jordan College: the Porter had given her a key that let her on to the roof of the Lodge Tower. He'd let her have it because he was too old to climb the steps and check the stonework and the lead, as was his duty four times a year; so she made a full report to him, and he passed it to the Bursar, and in exchange she was able to get out on to the roof whenever she wanted.

When she lay down on the lead, she was invisible from everywhere except the sky. A little parapet ran all the way around the square roof, and Pantalaimon often draped his pine-marten form over the mock-battlements on the corner facing south, and dozed while Lyra sat below with her back against the sun-drenched stone,



studying the books she'd brought up with her. Sometimes they'd stop and watch the storks that nested on St Michael's Tower, just across Turl Street. Lyra had a plan to tempt them over to Jordan, and she'd even dragged several planks of wood up to the roof and laboriously nailed them together to make a platform, just as they'd done at St Michael's; but it hadn't worked. The storks were loyal to St Michael's, and that was that.

'They wouldn't stay for long if we kept on coming here, anyway,' said Pantalaimon.

'We could tame them. I bet we could. What do they eat?'

'Fish,' he guessed. 'Frogs.'

He was lying on top of the stone parapet, lazily grooming his red-gold fur. Lyra stood up to lean on the stone beside him, her limbs full of warmth, and gazed out towards the south-east, where a dusty dark-green line of trees rose above the spires and rooftops in the early evening air.

She was waiting for the starlings. That year an extraordinary number of them had come to roost in the Botanic Garden, and every evening they would rise out of the trees like smoke, and swirl and swoop and dart through the skies above the city in their thousands.

'Millions,' Pan said.

'Maybe, easily. I don't know who could ever count them ... There they are!'

They didn't seem like individual birds, or even individual dots of black against the blue; it was the flock itself that was the individual. It was like a single piece of cloth, cut in a very complicated way that let it swing through itself and double over and stretch and fold in three dimensions without ever tangling, turning itself inside out and elegantly waving and crossing through and falling and rising and falling again.

'If it was saying something ...' said Lyra.

'Like signalling.'

'No one would know, though. No one could ever understand what it meant.'

'Maybe it means nothing. It just is.'

'Everything means something,' Lyra said

severely. 'We just have to find out how to read it.'

Pantalaimon leapt across a gap in the parapet to the stone in the corner, and stood on his hind legs, balancing with his tail and gazing more intently at the vast swirling flock over the far side of the city.

'What does that mean, then?' he said.

She knew exactly what he was referring to. She was watching it too. Something was jarring or snagging at the smoke-like, flag-like, ceaseless motion of the starlings, as if that miraculous multi-dimensional cloth had found itself unable to get rid of a knot.

'They're attacking something,' Lyra said, shading her eyes.

And coming closer. Lyra could hear them now, too: a high-pitched angry mindless shriek. The bird at the centre of the swirling anger was darting to right and left, now speeding upwards, now dropping almost to the rooftops, and when it was no closer than the spire of the University Church, and before they could even see what kind of bird it was, Lyra and Pan found themselves shaking with surprise. For it wasn't a bird,



although it was bird-shaped; it was a dæmon. A witch's dæmon.

'Has anyone else seen it? Is anyone looking?' said Lyra.

Pan's black eyes swept every rooftop, every window in sight, while Lyra leaned out and looked up and down the street on one side and then darted to the other three sides to look into Jordan's front quadrangle and along the roof as well. The citizens of Oxford were going about their daily business, and a noise of birds in the sky wasn't interesting enough to disturb them. Just as well: because a dæmon was instantly recognisable as what he was, and to see one without his human would have caused a sensation, if not an outcry of fear and horror.

'Oh, this way, this way!' Lyra said urgently, unwilling to shout, but jumping up and waving both arms; and Pan too was trying to attract the dæmon's attention, leaping from stone to stone,

flowing across the gaps and spinning around to leap back again.

The birds were closer now, and Lyra could see the dæmon clearly: a dark bird about the size of a thrush, but with long arched wings and a forked tail. Whatever he'd done to anger the starlings, they were possessed by fear and rage, swooping, stabbing, tearing, trying to batter him out of the air.

'This way! Here, here!' Pan cried, and Lyra flung open the trapdoor to give the dæmon a way of escape.

The noise, now that the starlings were nearly overhead, was deafening, and Lyra thought that people below must be looking up to see this war in the sky. And there were so many birds, as thick as flakes in a blizzard of black snow, that Lyra, her arm across her head, lost sight of the dæmon among them.

But Pan had him. As the dæmon-bird dived low towards the tower, Pan stood up on his hind legs, and then leapt up to gather the dæmon in his paws and roll with him over and over towards the trapdoor, and they fell through

clumsily as Lyra struck out with her fists to left and right and then tumbled through after the two dæmons, dragging the trapdoor shut behind her.

She crouched on the steps just beneath it, listening to the shrieks and screams outside rapidly lose their urgency. With their provocation out of sight, the starlings soon forgot that they were provoked.

'What now?' whispered Pan, just below her.

These wooden steps led up from a narrow landing, and were closed by a door at the bottom of the flight. Another door on the landing led to the rooms of young Dr Polstead, who was one of the few Scholars capable of climbing all the way up the tower several times a day. Being young, he had all his faculties in working order, and Lyra was sure he must have heard her tumble through and bang the trapdoor shut.

She put her finger to her lips. Pantalaimon, staring up in the near-dark, saw and turned his head to listen. There was a faint patch of a lighter colour on the step next to him, and as Lyra's eyes adjusted she made out the shape of

the dæmon and the V-shaped patch of white feathers on his rump.

Silence. Lyra whispered down:

'Sir, we must keep you hidden. I have a canvas bag – if that would be all right – I could carry you to our room ...'

'Yes,' came the answering whisper from below.

Lyra pressed her ear to the trapdoor, and, hearing no more tumult, opened it carefully and then darted out to retrieve her bag and the books she'd been studying. The starlings had left evidence of their last meals on the covers of both books, and Lyra made a face as she thought about explaining it to the Librarian of St Sophia's. She picked the books up gingerly and took them and the bag down through the trapdoor, to hear Pan whispering, 'Sssh ...'

Voices beyond the lower door: two men leaving Dr Polstead's room. Visitors – the university term hadn't begun, and he wouldn't be holding tutorials yet.

Lyra held open her bag. The strange dæmon hesitated. He was a witch's dæmon, and he was used to the wide Arctic skies. The narrow canvas

darkness was frightening to him.

'Sir, it will only be for five minutes,' she whispered. 'We can't let anyone else see you.'

'You are Lyra Silvertongue?'

'Yes, I am.'

'Very well,' he said, and delicately stepped into the bag that Lyra held open for him.

She picked it up carefully, waiting for the visitors' voices to recede down the stairs. When they'd gone, she stepped over Pan and opened the door quietly. Pan flowed through like dark water, and Lyra set the bag gently over her shoulder and followed, shutting the door behind her.

'Lyra? What's going on?'

The voice from the doorway behind her made her heart leap. Pan, a step ahead, hissed quietly.

'Dr Polstead,' she said, turning. 'Did you hear the birds?'

'Was that what it was? I heard a lot of banging,' he said.

He was stout, ginger-haired, affable; more inclined to be friendly to Lyra than she was to return the feeling. But she was always polite.

'I don't know what was the matter with them. Starlings, from over Magdalen way. They were all going mad. Look!'

She held out her bespattered books. He made a face.

'Better get those cleaned,' he said.

'Well, yes,' she said, 'that's where I was going.'

His dæmon was a cat, as ginger as he was. She purred a greeting from the doorway, and Pan acknowledged her courteously and moved away.

Lyra lived at St Sophia's in term time, but her room in the back quad at Jordan was always there when she wanted to use it. The clock was striking half-past six as she hurried there with her living burden – who was much lighter than her own dæmon, as she intended to tell Pantalaimon later.

As soon as the door had closed behind them, she set down the bag on her desk and let the dæmon out. He was frightened, and not only of the dark.

'I had to keep you out of sight –' she began.



'I understand. Lyra Silvertongue, you must guide me to a house in this city – I can't find the house, I don't know cities –'

'Stop,' she said, 'slow down, wait. What is your name, and your witch's name?'

'I am Ragi. She is Yelena Pazhets. She sent me – I must find a man who –'

'Please,' Lyra said, 'please don't speak so loudly. I'm safe here – this is my home – but people are curious – if they hear another dæmon's voice in here, it would be hard to explain, and then you would be in danger.'

The dæmon fluttered anxiously to the windowsill, and then to the back of Lyra's chair, and then back to the table.

'Yes,' he said. 'I must go to a man in this city. Your name is known to us – we heard that you could help. I am frightened this far south, and under a roof.'

'If I can help, I will. Who is this man? Do you know where he lives?'

'His name is Sebastian Makepeace. He lives in Jericho.'

'Just Jericho? That's all the address you have?'

The dæmon looked bewildered. Lyra didn't press him; to a witch of the far north, a settlement of more than four or five families was almost unimaginably vast and crowded.

'All right,' she said, 'I'll try and find him. But –'

'Now! It's urgent!'

'No. Not now. Tonight, after dark. Can you stay here comfortably? Or would you rather come with us to ... to my school, which is where I should be now?'

He flew from the table to the open window and perched on the sill for a moment, and then flew out altogether and circled in the air above the quadrangle. Pantalaimon leapt on to the windowsill to watch for him while Lyra searched through the untidy bookshelves for a map of the city.