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Opening extract from

Once Upon A Time In The North

Written by

Philip Pullman

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The battered cargo balloon came in out of a rainstorm over the White Sea, losing height rapidly and swaying in the strong north-west wind as the pilot trimmed the vanes and tried to adjust the gas-valve. The pilot was a lean young man with a large hat, a laconic disposition, and a thin moustache, and at present he was making for the Barents Sea Company Depot, whose location was marked on a torn scrap of paper pinned to the binnacle of the gondola. He could see the depot spread out around the little harbour ahead – a cluster of administrative buildings, a hangar, a warehouse, workshops, gas storage tanks and the associated machinery; it was all approaching fast, and he had to make quick adjustments to everything he could control in order to avoid the hangar roof and make for the open space beyond the warehouse.

The gas-valve was stuck. It needed a wrench, but the only tool to hand was a dirty old revolver, which the pilot hauled from the holster at his waist and used to bang the valve till it loosened all at once, releasing more gas than he really wanted. The balloon sagged and drooped suddenly, and plunged downwards, scattering a group of men clustered around a broken tractor. The

gondola smashed into the hard ground, and bounced and dragged behind the emptying balloon across the open space until it finally came to rest only feet away from a gas storage tank.

The pilot gingerly untangled his fingers from the rope he'd been holding on to, worked out which way up he was, shifted the tool box off his legs, wiped the oily water out of his eyes, and hauled himself upright.

'Well, Hester, looks like we're getting the hang of this,' he said. His dæmon, who looked like a small sardonic jackrabbit, flicked her ears as she clambered out of the tangle of tools, cold-weather clothing, broken instruments, and rope. Everything was saturated.

'My feelings are too deep to express, Lee,' she said.

Lee found his hat and emptied the rainwater out of it before settling it on his head. Then he became aware of the audience: the men by the tractor, two workers at the gas plant, one clasping his hands to his head after the near escape, and a shirtsleeved clerk from the administrative building, gaping in the open doorway.

Lee gave them a cheerful wave and turned back to make the balloon safe. He was proud of this balloon. He'd won it in a poker game six months before, in Texas. He was twenty-four, ready for adventure, and happy to go wherever the winds took him. He'd better be, as Hester reminded him; he wasn't going to go anywhere else.

Blown by the winds of chance, then, and very slightly aided by the first half of a tattered book called *The Elements of Aerial Navigation*, which his opponent in

the poker game had thrown in free (the second half was missing), he had drifted into the Arctic, stopping wherever he could find work, and eventually landed on this island. Novy Odense looked like a place where there was work to be done, and Lee's pockets were well nigh empty.

He worked for an hour or two to make everything secure and then, assuming the nonchalance proper to a prince of the air, he sauntered over to the administrative building to pay for the storage of the balloon.

'You come here for the oil?' said the clerk behind the counter.

'He came here for flying lessons,' said a man sitting by the stove drinking coffee.

'Oh, yeah,' said the clerk. 'We saw you land. Impressive.'

'What kind of oil would that be?' said Lee.

'Ah,' said the clerk, winking, 'all right, you're kidding. I got it. You heard nothing from me about any oil rush. I could tell you were a roughneck, but I won't say a word. You working for Larsen Manganese?'

'I'm an aeronaut,' said Lee. 'That's why I have a balloon. You going to give me a receipt for that?'

'Here,' said the clerk, stamping it and handing it over.

Lee tucked it into his waistcoat pocket and said, 'What's Larsen Manganese?'

'Big rich mining company. You rich?'

'Does it look like it?'

'No.'

'Well, you got that right,' said Lee. 'Anything else I got to do before I go and spend all my money?'

'Customs,' said the clerk. 'Over by the main gate.'

Lee found the Customs and Revenue office easily enough, and filled in a form under the instructions of a stern young officer.

'I see you have a gun,' the officer said.

'Is that against the law?'

'No. Are you working for Larsen Manganese?'

'I only been here five minutes and already two people asked me that. I never heard of Larsen Manganese before I landed here.'

'Lucky,' said the Customs officer. 'Open your kitbag, please.'

Lee offered it and its meagre contents for inspection. It took about five seconds.

'Thank you, Mr Scoresby,' said the officer. 'It would be a good idea to remember that the only legitimate agency of the law here on Novy Odense is the Office of Customs and Revenue. There is no police force. That means that if anyone transgresses the law, we deal with it, and let me assure you that we do so without hesitation.'

'Glad to hear it,' said Lee. 'Give me a law-abiding place any day.'

He swung his kitbag over his shoulder and set out for the town. It was late spring, and the snow was dirty and the road pitted with potholes. The buildings in the town were mostly of wood, which must have been imported, since few trees grew on the island. The only

exceptions he could see were built of some dark stone that gave a dull disapproving air to the town centre: a glum-looking oratory dedicated to St Petronius, a town hall, and a bank. Despite the blustery wind, the town smelt richly of its industrial products: there were refineries for fish oil, seal oil, and rock oil, there was a tannery and a fish-pickling factory, and various effluvia from all of them assailed Lee's nose or stung his eyes as the wind brought their fragrance down the narrow streets.

The most interesting thing was the bears. The first time Lee saw one slouching casually out of an alley he could scarcely believe his eyes. Gigantic, ivory-furred, silent: the creature's expression was impossible to read, but there was no mistaking the immense power in those limbs, those claws, that air of inhuman self-possession. There were more of them further into town, gathered in small groups at street corners, sleeping in alleyways, and occasionally working: pulling a cart, or lifting blocks of stone on a building site.

The townspeople took no notice of them, except to avoid them on the pavement. They didn't look at them either, Lee noticed.

'They want to pretend they're not there,' said Hester.

For the most part, the bears ignored the people, but once or twice Lee saw a glance of sullen anger in a pair of small intense black eyes, or heard a low and quickly suppressed growl as a well-dressed woman stood expectantly waiting to be made way for. But both



bears and people stepped aside when a couple of men in a uniform of maroon came strolling down the centre of the pavement. They wore pistols and carried batons, and Lee supposed them to be Customs men.

All in all, the place was suffused with an air of tension and anxiety.

Lee was hungry, so he chose a cheap-looking bar and ordered vodka and some pickled fish. The place was crowded and the air was rank with smokeleaf, and unless they were unusually excitable in this town, there was something in the nature of a quarrel going on. Voices were raised in the corner of the room, someone was banging his fist on a table, and the bartender was watching closely, paying only just enough attention to his job to refill Lee's glass without being asked.

Lee knew that one sure way to get into trouble of

his own was to enquire too quickly into other people's. So he didn't give more than a swift glance at the area where the voices were raised, but he was curious too, and once he'd made a start on the pickled fish he said to the bartender:

'What's the discussion about over there?'

'That red-haired bastard van Breda can't set sail and leave. He's a Dutchman with a ship tied up in the harbour and they won't release his cargo from the warehouse. He's been driving everyone mad with his complaining. If he doesn't shut up soon I'm going to throw him out.'

'Oh,' said Lee. 'Why won't they release the cargo?'

'I don't know. Probably he hasn't paid the storage fee. Who cares?'

'Well,' said Lee, 'I guess he does.'

He turned round in a leisurely way and rested his elbows on the bar behind him. The man with the red hair was about fifty, stocky and high-coloured, and when one of the other men at the table tried to put a hand on his arm he shook it off violently, upsetting a glass. Seeing what he'd done, the Dutchman put both hands to his head in a gesture that looked more like despair than fury. Then he tried placating the man whose beer he'd spilt, but that went wrong too, and he banged both fists on the table and shouted through the hubbub.

'Such a frenzy!' said a voice beside Lee. 'He'll work himself into a heart attack, wouldn't you say?'

Lee turned to see a thin, hungry-looking man in a

faded black suit that was a little too big for him.

'Could be,' he said.

'Are you a stranger here, sir?'

'Just flew in.'

'An aeronaut! How exciting! Well, things are really looking up in Novy Odense. Stirring times!'

'I hear they've struck oil,' said Lee.

'Indeed. The town is positively palpitating with excitement. *And* there's to be an election for Mayor this very week. There hasn't been so much news in Novy Odense for years and years.'

'An election, eh? And who are the candidates?'

'The incumbent Mayor, who will not win, and a very able candidate called Ivan Dimitrovich Poliakov, who will. He is on the threshold of a great career. He will really put our little town on the map! He will use the mayoralty as the stepping stone to a seat in the Senate at Novgorod, and then, who knows? He will be able to take his anti-bear campaign all the way to the mainland. But you, sir,' he went on, 'what has inspired your visit to Novy Odense?'

'I'm looking for innocent employment. As you say, I'm an aeronaut by profession...'

He noticed the other man's glance, which had strayed to the belt under Lee's coat. In leaning back against the bar, Lee had let the coat fall away to reveal the pistol he kept at his waist, which an hour or two before had done duty as a hammer.

'And a man of war, I see,' said the other.

'Oh no. Every fight I've been in, I tried to run away

from. This is just a matter of personal decoration. Hell, I ain't even sure I know how to fire this, uh, what is it – revolvolator or something…'

'Ah, you're a man of wit as well!'

'Tell me something,' said Lee. 'Just now you mentioned an anti-bear campaign. Now I've just come here through the town, and I couldn't help noticing the bears. That's a curious thing to me, because I never seen creatures like that before. They just free to roam around as they please?'

The thin man picked up his empty glass and elaborately tried to drain it before setting it back down on the bar with a sigh.

'Oh, now let me fill that for you,' said Lee. 'It's warm work explaining things to a stranger. What are you drinking?'

The bartender produced a bottle of expensive cognac, to Lee's resigned amusement and a click of annoyance from Hester's throat.

'Very kind, sir, very kind,' said the thin man, whose butterfly-dæmon opened her resplendent wings once or twice on his shoulder. 'Allow me to introduce myself – Oskar Sigurdsson is my name – poet and journalist. And you, sir?'

'Lee Scoresby, aeronaut for hire.'

They shook hands.

'You were telling me about bears,' prompted Lee, after a look at his own glass, which was nearly empty and would have to remain so.

'Yes, indeed. Worthless vagrants. Bears these days



are sadly fallen from what they were. Once they had a great culture, you know – brutal, of course, but noble in its own way. One admires the true savage, uncorrupted by softness and ease. Several of our great sagas recount the deeds of the bear-kings. I myself am working – have been for some time – on a poem in the old metres which will tell of the fall of Ragnar Lokisson, the last great king of Svalbard. I would be glad to recite it for you –'

'Nothing I'd like more,' said Lee hastily; 'I'm mighty partial to a good yarn. But maybe another time. Tell me about the bears I saw out in the streets.'

'Vagrants, as I say. Scavengers, drunkards, many of them. Degraded specimens every one. They steal, they drink, they lie and cheat –'

'They lie?'

'You can depend on it.'

'You mean they *speak*?'

'Oh, yes. You didn't know? They used to be fine craftsmen too – skilful workers in metal – but not this generation. All they can manage now is coarse welding, rough work of that kind. The armour they have now is crude, ugly –'

'*Armour?*'

'Not allowed to wear it in town, of course. They make it, you know, a piece at a time, as they grow older. By the time they're fully mature they have the full set. But as I say, it's rough, crude stuff, with none of the finesse of the great period. The fact is that nowadays they're merely parasites, the dregs of a dying race, and it would be better for us all if –'

He never finished his sentence, because at that point the bartender had had enough of the Dutchman's troubles, and came out from behind the bar with a heavy stick in his hand. Warned by the faces around him, the Captain stood up and half turned unsteadily, his face a dull red, his eyes glittering, and spread his hands; but the bartender raised his stick, and was about to bring it down when Lee moved.

He sprang between the two men, seized the Captain's wrists, and said, 'Now, Mr Bartender, you don't need to hit a man when he's drunk; there's a better way to deal with this kind of thing. Come on, Captain, there's fresh air outside. This place is bad for your complexion.'

'What the hell is this to do with you?' the bartender shouted.

'Why, I'm the Captain's guardian angel. You want to put that stick down?'

'I'll put it down on your goddamn head!'

Lee dropped the Captain's wrists and turned to face the bartender squarely.

'You try that, and see what happens next,' he said.

Silence in the bar; no one moved. Even the Captain only blinked and looked blurrily at the tense little stand-off in front of him. Lee was perfectly ready to fight, and the bartender could see it, and after a few moments he lowered the stick and growled sullenly, 'You too. Get out.'

'Just what me and the Captain had in mind,' Lee said. 'Now stand aside.'

He took the Captain's arm and guided the man out through the crowded bar-room. As the door swung shut behind them he heard the bartender call, 'And don't come back.'

The Captain swayed and leaned against the wall, and then blinked again and focused his eyes.

'Who are you?' he said, and then, 'No, I don't care who you are. Go to hell.'

He stumbled away. Lee watched him go, and scratched his head.

'We been here less than an hour,' said Hester, 'and you already got us thrown out of a bar.'

'Yep, another successful day. But damn, Hester, you don't hit a drunk man with a stick.'

'Find a bed, Lee. Keep still. Don't talk to anyone. Think good thoughts. Stay out of trouble.'

'That's a good idea,' said Lee.