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Opening extract from

Once Upon A Time In The North

Written by

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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.



A few enquiries brought him to a dingy boarding house near the harbour. He paid the landlady for a week's room and board and laid his kitbag on the bed before going out to seek a way of earning some money.

There was a brisk wind snapping in from the sea, and Lee pulled his coat around him and settled his hat more firmly on his head as he came out of a side street on to the harbour front. He found a line of shops facing the water – a ship's chandler, a clothing store and the like – and a dingy bar or two, and the broad, stone-built headquarters of the Provincial Customs and Revenue Authority, with a navy-and-white flag flying from the roof. From each end of this waterfront a quay stretched out ahead, forming a long sheltered harbour a hundred and fifty yards or so wide. At the far end stood a lighthouse on a headland that curved around from the right.

Lee looked at the boats in the harbour, taking stock. For a town in the throes of an oil rush, it didn't seem very busy. There was a coal tanker tied up at the quay on the right, sitting low in the water, so they hadn't unloaded her yet; and the only crane on that side was a big steam affair that was working to set a new mainmast in a barque, attended by more men than were necessary, each vividly expressing his point of view. It would take all day; the coal would have to wait.

On the other quay, to the left, there were two smaller anbaric cranes, the first busy loading barrels

essential to take the greatest care with regard to the management of ballast. The balance between buoyancy and weight is a delicate one, and many an aeronaut, alarmed by the apparent reluctance of his craft to take to the air, has jettisoned too much lead shot too early, and as a consequence has had to let out gas to avoid soaring too high. It is a grave mistake to leave too little in reserve. A buoyancy of a very few pounds is quite sufficient to bear the largest balloon aloft. Patience and caution are the watchwords. Aerial navigation is no game for the reckless and improvident.

Notes to Chapter Six

1. As a matter of fact, this is impossible.
2. See *The Rapture of the Heights*, by Lt-Col Sir W.G. Hebblewhite, VC, CMG, FRAS.
3. These are normally made of whalebone.
4. The cubic capacity of a gondola is most commonly ascertained by Stirling's rule; but the following simple plan may be adopted for general purposes. Measure the length and breadth outside and depth inside. Multiply them together and by 0.6. The product is the capacity of the vessel in cubic feet.
5. Only a fool would suppose so.

Chapter VII

Procedure for Landing a Balloon

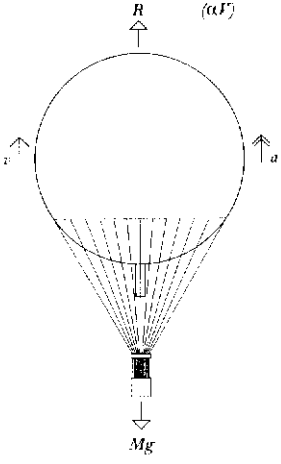


Figure 9.

↑ = *force* ↑ = *velocity* ↑ = *acceleration*

Mg is the combined weight of the balloon, occupants and ballast and needs to be carefully monitored.
R is resistance or buoyancy which will be affected by other factors like the height of the balloon, its velocity, air pressure, wind etc.
Size of resistance could be proportional to Volume of balloon or to Velocity.

If $R>Mg$ (Resistance greater than weight) then balloon will accelerate up.
If $R<Mg$ balloon will decelerate, reach its highest point, then start descending.
If too much gas is released the descent may happen too fast resulting in a crash landing. Extra ballast may need to be released to slow the descent.

Once aloft in the empyrean, with both gas and ballast in reserve, the aeronaut has little to fear. It is when he approaches the earth with a view to resuming his lowly status as a creature of gravity that the pilot of an aerial vessel encounters the first real danger of his flight. And yet by taking the simplest and most basic precautions, he may safely and easily negotiate the perils of landing, and emerge from his craft with all the nonchalance proper to a prince of the air.

The first and most essential matter to bear in mind is

of fish-oil into the hold of one small steam coaster, the second unloading the timber piled high on the deck of another. Beyond them lay a schooner, at which no activity of any sort was going on, and Lee guessed that to be the unfortunate Captain van Breda's vessel that couldn't load her cargo. Lee couldn't even see anyone on deck. The ship had a forlorn air.

Running along each quay was a line of stone-built warehouses, and at the near end of the left-hand quay was a cluster of offices including that of the Harbour Master. There was a pilot's launch tied up at the steps outside it, and a substantial steam tug a little further on; and if neither of those was busy, trade must be slow.

Lee rang the bell at the Harbour Master's office and went in, having read the brass plate beside the door.



'Good day to you, Mr Aagaard,' he said. 'I've come to see whether I can find any work around here. Scoresby is the name, and I have a cargo balloon in storage at the Barents Sea Company Depot. Any likelihood of an aeronaut's services being in demand, do you suppose?'

The Harbour Master was an elderly man with a sour and cautious expression. His cat-dæmon opened her eyes briefly and closed them again in disdain.

'Business is slow, Mr Scoresby,' said the old man. 'We have four vessels working in the harbour, and when they have gone, I do not expect any more trade for a week. Times are bad.'

'Four vessels?' said Lee. 'My eyes must be deceiving me. I saw five.'

'Four.'

'Then my eyes do need fixing. I saw a three-masted hallucination at the end of the east quay.'

'There is no work at the east quay, or at the west. Good day, Mr Scoresby.'

'And good day to you, sir.'

He and Hester left. Lee rubbed his jaw and looked left, along the quay, to the still schooner.

'I don't like to see any vessel so quiet,' he said. 'She looks like a ghost ship. There ought to be something the crew could be doing. Well, let's go and see what price they charge for hemp cord.'

He strolled along to the chandlery, where at least the stink of fish oil and tanning skins gave way to that of clean tarred rope. The man behind the counter was

reading a newspaper, and he barely looked up when Lee came in.

'Good day,' said Lee, to no response.

He wandered about the shop, looking at everything, and as usual saw plenty he needed and little he could afford. He scratched his head at the prices until he remembered that this place was an ice-bound island for six months of the year, and everything had to be imported.

'How's the election going?' he said to the shopkeeper, nodding at his newspaper. 'Will Mr Poliakov become the new Mayor?'

'You want to buy something?'

'Maybe. Ain't seen anything I can afford, at your prices.'

'Well, I don't sell newspapers.'

'Then good day to you,' said Lee, and left.

He turned up into the town. The blue sky of morning had gone, and a bitter wind was bringing grey clouds scudding across from the north. There were only three people in sight: two women with shopping baskets and an old man with a stick. A group of bears stopped their rumbling conversation and watched him as he went past before beginning again, their voices so low he almost felt them through the soles of his feet.

'This is the bleakest, smelliest, most unfriendliest damn place we ever set foot in,' Lee said.

'I wouldn't argue with you, Lee.'

'Something'll turn up, though.'

But nothing turned up that afternoon.



The evening meal was served in the parlour of the boarding house, which was a dismal place with a small dining table, an iron stove, a shelf of religious books, and a small collection of battered and dusty board games with names like *Peril of the Pole*, *Flippety-Flop*, and *Animal Misfitz*. The meal itself consisted of a mutton stew and an apple pie. The pie was tolerable. Lee's fellow boarders were a photographer from Oslo, an official from the Institute of Economics in Novgorod, and a young lady called Miss Victoria Lund, who worked in the public library. She was as pretty as a picture, if it was a picture of a high-minded young woman of unyielding rectitude and severity. She was tall, and on the bony side of slim, and her fair hair was tightly pulled back into a bun. Her long-sleeved white blouse was buttoned to the neck. She was the first young woman Lee had spoken to for a month.

'So you're a librarian, Miss Lund? What kind of books do the people of Novy Odense like to read?'

'Various kinds.'

'I might look in myself tomorrow, see if I can find out some information. There's a book called *The Elements of Aerial Navigation* I'd really like to finish reading. Where is your library, Miss Lund?'

'In Aland Square.'

'Right. Aland Square. You been working there long?'

'No.'

'I see. So you're – ah – newly qualified, I guess?'

'Yes.'

'And...Is Novy Odense your home town?'

'No.'

'Then I guess we're both strangers here, huh?'

That brought no response, but her swallow-dæmon looked at Hester from the back of her chair, spread his wings wide, and then closed them again, followed by his eyes.

But Lee persevered.

'Would you care for some of this pie, Miss Lund?'

'Thank you.'

'You know, right after supper I thought I'd take a stroll along the waterfront and see what the enterprising citizens of Novy Odense have to offer in the way of night-time entertainment. I don't suppose you'd care to accompany me?'

'No, I would not.'

Miss Lund left the table immediately the meal was over, and as soon as she was gone the other two men laughed and clapped Lee on the shoulder.

'Fifteen!' said the photographer.

'I made it fourteen,' said the economist, 'but you win.'

'Fourteen what?' said Lee.

'Words you got out of her,' said the photographer. 'I bet you'd get more than ten, and Mikhail here said you wouldn't.'

'Careful, Lee,' murmured Hester.

'So you gentlemen are of a sporting persuasion?'

Lee said, taking no notice of her. 'Best thing I've encountered today. What do you say to a game of cards, now this delicious repast is but a fading memory and our fair companion has withdrawn? Unless you'd like to take a chance on *Flippety-Flop*?'

'Nothing would please me more,' said the photographer, 'but I have an appointment to take a portrait of the local headmaster and his family. I can't afford to miss it.'

'And as for me, I'm going to a meeting at the town hall,' said the other man. 'The mayoral election is hotting up. I need to see which way it's going to go.'

'Well, this is an exciting town, and no mistake,' said Lee. 'I can barely contain my exuberance.'

'Would you care to step along to the town hall and join me in the audience?' said the economist.

'I believe I would,' said Lee, and the other man's robin-dæmon twitched her tail.



The election meeting was certainly the place to be that evening. Men and women were making their way up the muddy street towards the town hall, which was brilliantly lit with gas lamps, Lee noticed with satisfaction: if there was a source of gas on the island, he'd be able to fill his balloon without too much difficulty – provided he could pay for it, of course. The people were dressed respectably, and so was Lee, to the extent of his one necktie; and they were talking with some animation.

'Is this the way they usually do politics on Novy Odense?' Lee said to his companion.

'There is a great deal at stake in this election,' said the economist, whose name, Lee had learned, was Mikhail Ivanovich Vassiliev. 'In fact it's the reason I'm here. My academy is very interested in this man Poliakov. He used to be a Senator, but he hates to be reminded of the fact. He had to resign over a financial scandal, and he's using this mayoral election as a way of rehabilitating himself.'

'Oh, is that so?' said Lee, watching the crowd on the steps, and noticing the uniformed stewards. 'I see there's a lot of Customs men around. Are they expecting a ruckus?'

'Customs men?'

'The bullies in the maroon uniforms.'

'Oh, they're not Customs. That's the security arm of Larsen Manganese.'

'I keep hearing that name...Who are they?'

'Very big mining corporation. If Poliakov gets in, they will prosper. Rumour has it that the company has been looking for a confrontation with the Customs; it's happening elsewhere throughout the north – private companies invading the public sphere. Security, they call it: what they mean is threat. I've heard they have a large gun that they're keeping secret, for example, and they'd love to provoke a riot and bring it into use – That gentleman is hailing you.'

They were at the top of the steps leading to the main doors, but they couldn't move any further because

of the crush. Lee turned to look where Vassiliev was pointing, and saw the poet Oskar Sigurdsson waving and beckoning.

Lee waved back, but Sigurdsson beckoned even more urgently.

'Better go see what he wants,' he said, and made his way through the crowd.

Sigurdsson's butterfly-dæmon was fluttering round and round his head, and the poet was beaming with pleasure.

'Mr Scoresby! So glad to see you!' he said. 'Miss Poliakova, may I introduce Mr Scoresby, the celebrated aeronaut?'

'Celebrated, my tail,' muttered Hester, but the young lady at Sigurdsson's side had Lee's interest at once. She was about eighteen years old, and a contrast in every way to the starched Miss Lund: her cheeks were rosy, her eyes were large and black, her lips were soft and red, her hair was a mass of dark curls. Her dæmon was a mouse. Lee took her hand with pleasure.

'Delighted to make your acquaintance,' he said, and swept off his hat as well as he could in the crush.

Sigurdsson had been saying something.

'I beg your pardon, Mr Sigurdsson,' Lee said. 'I was unable to concentrate on your words because of Miss Poliakova's eyes. I wager you have dozens of young men come from all over the northlands to gaze at your eyes, Miss Poliakova.'

She let them fall for a moment, as if in modesty, and then gazed up through her lashes. Sigurdsson

plucked at Lee's sleeve.

'Miss Poliakova is the daughter of the distinguished candidate for Mayor,' he said.

'Oh, is that right? Are we going to hear your father speak tonight, miss?'

'Yes,' she said, 'he will speak, I think.'

'Who is he up against in the election?'

'Oh, I don't know,' she said. 'I think two men, or perhaps one.'

Lee looked at her closely, while trying to muffle Hester's grumbling from inside his coat. Was this young lady genuinely slow-witted, or just pretending to be? She smiled again. She must be teasing. Good! If she wanted to play, Lee was in the mood for that.

The obstruction inside the door had been cleared, and the crowd was moving up the steps, marshalled by the Larsen Manganese security men. Miss Poliakova stumbled, and Lee offered his arm, which she took readily. Meanwhile Sigurdsson was pressing close at his other side, saying something that Lee couldn't quite hear and wasn't interested in, because the closer he got to Miss Poliakova, the more he was aware of the delicate floral scent she was wearing, or perhaps it was the fragrance of her hair, or perhaps it was just the sweet fact of her young body pressed against his side; anyway, Lee was intoxicated.

'What did you say?' he said to Sigurdsson, reluctantly.

The poet had been plucking at his other arm, and was eagerly gesturing for Lee to bend his head as if to receive a confidence.

'I said you might be able to make yourself useful to Olga's father,' Sigurdsson murmured as they entered the main hall. The place was set out with wooden chairs, and the platform was decorated with bunting and banners bearing the slogan POLIAKOV FOR PROGRESS AND JUSTICE.

'You don't say,' said Lee.

'I'll introduce you after the meeting.'

'Well...thanks.'

Lee's attitude to fathers was that he preferred to keep them at a distance. Fathers did not want their daughters doing what Lee had in mind. But before he could think of an excuse, he found himself in the front row, where all the seats were reserved.

'Oh, I can't sit here,' he protested. 'These seats are for important guests –'

'But you *are* an important guest!' said the poet roguishly, and the girl said, 'Oh, do stay, Mr Scoresby!'

'Damn fool,' muttered Hester, but only Lee heard her, as she intended.

They had hardly sat down when a stout official came out on to the stage and announced that they were closing the doors because the great desire of the people to hear the candidate speak meant that the hall was already full beyond its legal capacity, and they couldn't let anyone else in. Lee looked around and saw people standing three deep at the back and around the sides of the auditorium.

'He's a popular man, your father, no doubt about that,' he said to Miss Poliakova. 'What's his main policy?

What's he going to do when he gets into office?'

'Bears,' she said with a delicate shudder, and made a face expressive of polite horror.

'Oh, bears, eh,' said Lee. 'He doesn't like bears?'

'I'm scared of bears,' she said.

'Well, that's understandable. They're – uh – they're pretty big, after all. I ain't never dealt with your special Arctic bears, but I was chased by a grizzly once over in the Yukon.'

'Oh, how frightful! Did he catch you?'

And once again Lee felt as if he'd missed the bottom step in the dark: could she really be this stupid? Was she doing it on purpose?

'Well, he did,' he said, 'but it turned out the old feller only wanted to borrow a griddle to cook up a salmon he'd caught. I was agreeable to that, and we sat around yarning over supper. He drank my whisky and smoked my cigars, and we promised to keep in touch. But I lost his address.'

'Oh, that's a pity,' she said. 'But, you know...'

Lee scratched his head, but he didn't have to think of anything else to say because at that point a group of three men came on to the stage and the whole audience stood to applaud and cheer. Lee had to stand as well, or seem conspicuously rude, and he looked around for his boarding-house acquaintance, but among all the faces bright with fervour, the eyes ablaze with enthusiasm, he couldn't spot him anywhere.

As they sat down again Sigurdsson said, 'Wonderful response! Promises very well, wouldn't you say?'

'Never seen anything like it,' said Lee.

He settled back to listen to the speeches.



And very shortly afterwards, it seemed, he was woken up by a roar from the crowd. Cheers, clapping, shouts of acclamation echoed around the big wooden hall as Lee sat blinking and clapping with the rest.

On the platform stood Poliakov, black-coated, heavy-bearded, red-cheeked, with one fist on the lectern and the other clenched at his heart. His eyes glared out across the hall, and his dæmon, a kind of hawk that Lee didn't recognise, sat on the lectern and raised her wings till they were outspread.

Lee murmured to Hester, tucked into his coat,

'How long have I been asleep?'

'Ain't been counting.'

'Well, damnit, what's this diplomat been saying?'

'Ain't been listening.'

He stole a glance at Olga, and saw her settled, placid, adoring gaze rest on her father's face without any change of expression, even when the candidate suddenly banged the lectern with his fist and startled his own dæmon into taking to the air and wheeling around his head before settling on his shoulder – a fine effect, Lee thought, but Hester muttered, 'How long'd they spend practising that in front of a mirror?'

'Friends,' Poliakov cried. 'Friends and citizens, friends and human beings, I don't need to warn



you about this insidious invasion. I don't *need* to warn you, because every drop of human blood in your human veins already warns you instinctively that there can be no friendship between humans and bears. And you know precisely what I mean by that, and you know why I have to speak in these terms. There *can* be no friendship, there *should* be no friendship, and under my administration I promise you with my hand on my heart there *will* be no friendship with these inhuman and intolerable...'

The rest of the sentence was lost, as he intended it should be, in the clamour, the shouts and the whistles and the stamping that broke over it like a great wave.

The poet was on his feet, waving his hands above his head with excitement, and shouting, 'Yes! Yes! Yes!'

On Lee's other side, the candidate's daughter was clapping her hands like a little girl, stiff fingers all pointing in the same direction as she brought her palms together.

It seemed that the end of the speech had arrived, because Poliakov and his men were leaving the platform, and others were beginning to make their way along the rows of chairs, soliciting donations.

'Don't give that bastard a cent,' said Hester.

'Ain't got a cent to give,' muttered Lee.

'Wasn't that magnificent?' said Sigurdsson.

'Finest piece of oratorical flamboyancy I ever heard,' said Lee. 'A lot of it went over my head, on account of I don't know the local situation, but he knows how to preach, and that's a fact.'

'Come with me, and I shall introduce you. Mr Poliakov will be delighted to make your acquaintance –'

'Oh, no, no,' said Lee hastily. 'It wouldn't be right to waste the man's time when I ain't got a vote to give him.'

'Not at all! In fact I know he will be most gratified to meet you,' said Sigurdsson, lowering his voice confidentially and seizing Lee's elbow in a tight grip. 'There is a job he has in mind,' he murmured.

At the same moment, Olga clutched Lee's other sleeve.

'Mr Scoresby, do come and meet Papa!' she said, and her eyes were so wide and so candid, and her lips were so soft, and what with those eyes and those lips, and the delicate curls of hair, and that sweet heart-shaped face, Lee very nearly lost his presence of mind altogether and kissed her right there. What did it matter if she had the brain of a grape? It wasn't her brain Lee wanted to hold in his arms. Her body had its own kind of intelligence, just as his did, and their bodies had a great deal to say to each other. His head swam; he was fully persuaded.

'Lead me to him,' he said.