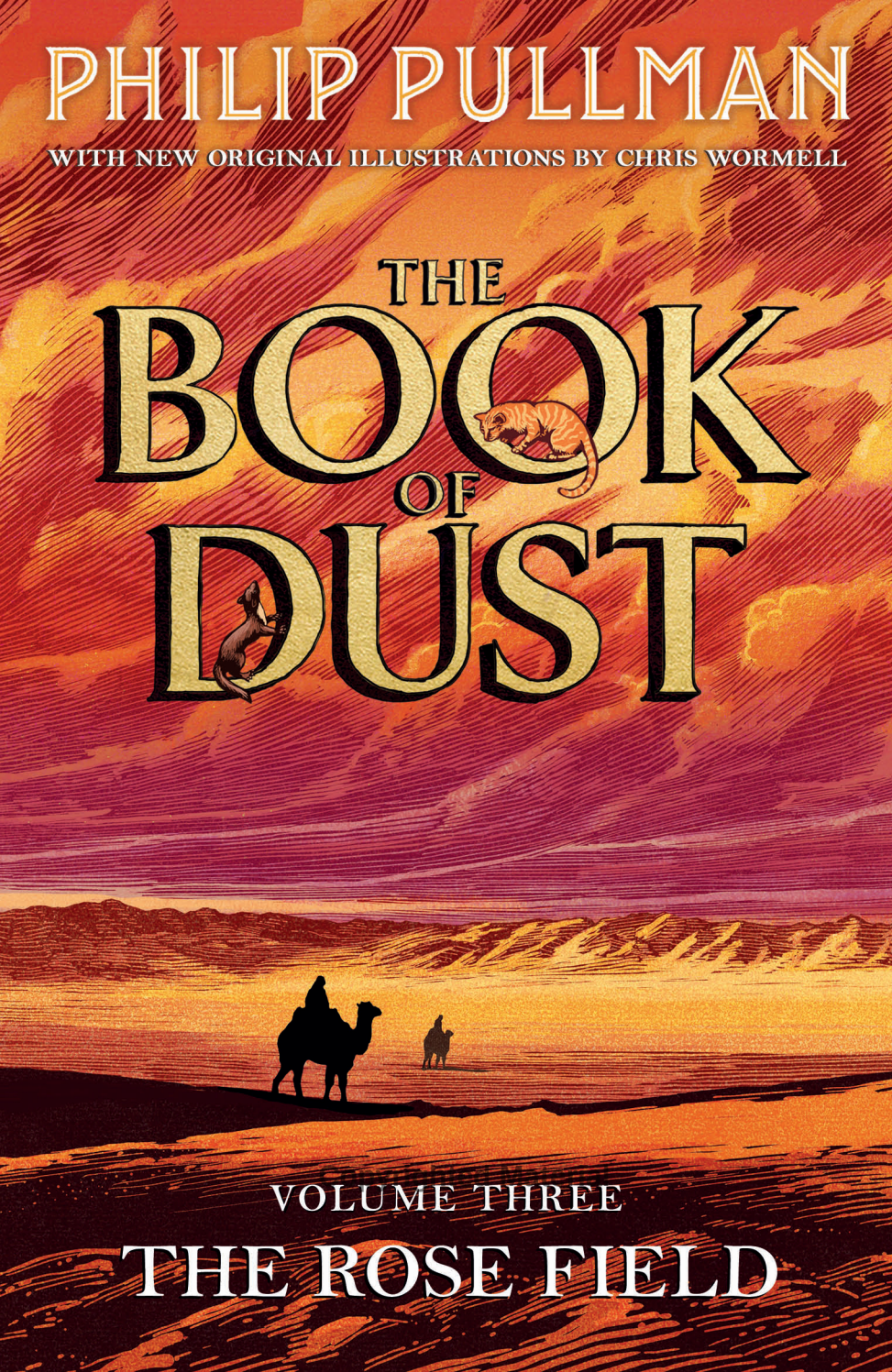
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THE BOOK OF DUST



VOLUME THREE

THE ROSE FIELD

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THE BOOK OF DUST

VOLUME THREE

THE ROSE FIELD

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To Caradoc King, MDOC.
Sixty years . . .

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Entre la rose et moi, je la vois qui s'abrite;
Sur la poudre qui danse, elle glisse et n'irrite
Nul feuillage, mais passe, et se brise partout . . .

Between the rose and me, I see her shelter;
On the dancing dust, she glides without stirring
The leaves, she goes past in a thousand pieces . . .

Paul Valéry, *La Jeune Parque*

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At the end of the previous book, THE SECRET COMMONWEALTH, *Lyra reaches the deserted city, al-Khan al-Azraq, in her search for her dæmon, Pan.*

Under the moon, she goes alone into the ruins.

She'd turned to avoid a broken mass of gleaming marble that had once been a temple. There she found herself at one end of a colonnade, which cast black bars of shadow across the snow-white stone of the path.

And there was a girl sitting on a fallen piece of masonry, a girl of sixteen or so, of North African appearance and shabby dress. She wasn't a phantom: she cast a shadow, as Lyra herself did, and, like her, she had no dæmon. She stood up as soon as she saw Lyra. In the moonlight she looked tense and full of fear.

'You are Miss Silvertongue,' she said.

'Yes,' said Lyra, astonished. 'Who are you?'

'Nur Huda el-Wahabi. Come on, come quickly. We have been waiting for you.'

'We? Who—? You don't mean . . . ?'

But Nur Huda tugged urgently at Lyra's right hand, and they hurried together along the colonnade, towards the heart of the ruins.

And now the final part begins.

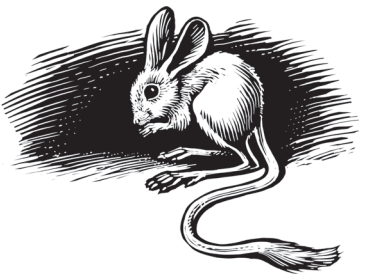
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PART ONE

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1

Beings of Another Kind

'But who?' said Lyra. 'Who is waiting?'

'Me,' said Nur Huda, 'and my dæmon, Jamal, but they won't—'

'Is he here? Is your dæmon here?'

'Yes, but they won't let him – won't let me . . .'

Lyra stopped. The moonlight shone full in the younger girl's face, glistening on the lip she was biting and on the unshed tears in her eyes. All around them were tumbled columns of marble, statues of long-forgotten queens or gods, some still intact, and walls and arches and colonnades, gleaming brilliantly white where the moon touched them, among jagged shadows of fathomless black where it did not.

'But who are *they*?' said Lyra.

'Just voices. I don't know! It's like a war in here. They fight, and I don't know why, I don't know who they are, and I can't see them. I'm so frightened. Just voices. I can't see them.'

'And they won't let you do what? Take your dæmon away, is that it? They're keeping him prisoner?'

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Nur Huda nodded. The movement shook a tear from one eye and she wiped it away with the heel of her hand.

'And how did you know my name?'

'Your dæmon told me. Pan. He said you were coming.'

'Pan? You've *seen* Pan? Where? Is he here?'

Lyra's eagerness was so sudden and passionate that she didn't even notice that she'd seized the girl's arm. Nur Huda pulled away, her eyes wide with alarm.

Lyra let go. 'Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you . . . Only, I've been following him all this way, trying to find him, and if he's not here . . .'

But she'd spoken too quickly, too impatiently. The girl was hungry, and tired, and horribly alone.

She was going to cry, so Lyra hugged her and said, 'Let's sit down. We're both exhausted and frightened. Just tell me everything that happened to you. I won't interrupt, I promise.'

They sat on a crumbled shelf of stone surrounding a basin where a fountain had once played. A trickle of water still fell from the time-smudged mask of a satyr; it must have gushed from his mouth when it was built, and the spring that supplied it was still flowing. Nur Huda turned and scooped up a handful of water and sipped it. Lyra did the same. It was ice-cold and clean, and she drank some more. She had no idea she was so thirsty.

'Where have you come from?' Lyra asked.

'From Baghdad with my family. But we were in a boat and it sank, and when I swam to the shore I found Jamal was gone. I thought he was dead and that meant I was too, and I was very afraid. I was alone for a while. I didn't know what to do. But then Pan found me asleep on a hill and he guarded me and when I woke up he told me about you and we thought Jamal might have come to this place so we came here. Pan was with me so it didn't look as if . . . you know.'

'Jamal is your dæmon?'

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'Yes.'

'What did Pan say?'

'He said he was looking for something you'd lost.'

'Did he tell you what that was?'

Nur Huda shook her head. 'He said he was going ahead of you to find it and keep it safe. To the east, where the roses come from, that's what he said. But he told me you would come here soon and I would know you because you had no dæmon, like me . . .' Her voice was unsteady.

'And . . . is Jamal here?'

'No. I don't think so. Something happened. A man came out of the desert and was hiding from a giant bird, and then he saw that Jamal was close by, and snatched him before I could reach him.'

'A man? Was he one of the voices?'

'No. Only a man. He looked like a Scythian, I don't know, maybe Chorasmian—'

Lyra blinked with surprise.

Nur Huda noticed, and went on, 'I don't know. He might not be real anyway. He's only got one eye . . . The bird was hunting him. It was so big, when it flew overhead it darkened the whole sky. I thought maybe the man took Jamal to give him to the bird as a – as a, you know, when you throw something to a wolf to distract it . . .'

'A decoy?'

'I didn't know that word. Yes, that. I don't know, I'm sorry! I'm so frightened . . .'

'And you said it's like a war here . . . What did you mean? Dæmons fighting other dæmons, something like that?'

'I can't tell. Only that sometimes the air is full of screams and anger and crying. Probably not dæmons. There are not many dæmons here, really. Only the voices . . .'

'What do they say? What language do they speak?'

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'Many languages. They whisper. Sometimes you think it's insects, maybe crickets, cicadas, and then you hear them say real words . . .'

'When do they speak?'

'You can hear them now.'

Lyra listened. The silence was vast. It was the sort of night when you might hear the planets moving among the stars. She found herself comparing it with the silence in the world of the dead, but that was a closed silence, where nothing was alive, and that world was stale and stuffy, for all its immensity. But the silence in al-Khan al-Azraq was open, and not quite silence either. There were little scratches, little susurrations and clicks and rasps, none of them louder than a pinch of sand dropped on the skin of a snare drum, and they all meant . . . nothing. She remembered a night some years before, in Oxford, when she had thought that everything had a meaning, and had seen how she might understand it. But that was before she'd read Gottfried Brande and Simon Talbot, at a time when Pan was still happy with her.

'You can't hear them?' said Nur Huda.

She spoke tentatively, anxious that Lyra should believe her, and Lyra saw how young the girl was, and how much she'd suffered, and felt how tightly Nur Huda was still gripping her arm.

'Yes, I can a bit, but I don't know what they're saying. Is this the best place to listen to them?'

'It's better in the marketplace. This way.'

They had to clamber over the fallen stones and make their way around the broken walls of a basilica before they came to an open area that did look like a marketplace, a public space to hold meetings: a forum.

The sand underfoot was so fine and white that it might have been newly milled flour. In the centre of the forum there was

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a plinth where a statue had once stood. The statue itself lay in three pieces beside it, toppled by an earthquake, perhaps: a bearded god whose sightless eyes glared up at the moon. Lyra and Nur Huda sat on his muscular chest. There was nothing moving in the forum, not a sign of life anywhere, and everything around was drenched in moonlight and frozen in stillness.

Lyra gradually became more aware of the scratchy little susurrus, the scraping of insect claws, the clicks and rustlings like dry leaves in a porcelain bowl being stirred by a breeze. The girl's arm pressing against hers, her flesh warm in the cold air, made Lyra realise a little of what their dæmons must be feeling, so bare and vulnerable away from the solid comfort of a human body.

She gathered her breath to say something, but Nur Huda whispered, 'Sssh . . .'

Lyra could hear no difference in the tiny scratchings and scrapes. She strained to hear better, and tried to focus her ears on whatever was there, and then remembered Giorgio Brabandt telling her how to see the secret commonwealth: *You got to look at it sideways*, he'd said. *Out the corner of your eye. So you gotta think about it out the corner of your mind. It's there and it en't, both at the same time.*

Of course. She shouldn't strain at it. She should listen as if she was reading the alethiometer in the old way, as if it didn't mean anything, and as if it did. She relaxed her mind and her eyes and her ears, and let the night flow in and out of her body. A nimbus of perception spread out around her as if her senses themselves were slowly merging with the city of the moon.

And in the clicks and rasps and scratches she began to hear words:

. . . you alone . . . we want you to hear . . . this is not for the girl . . . send her to the fountain . . . this is your task, not hers . . .

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Nur Huda heard them as well. She gripped Lyra's arm more tightly and began to say something, but Lyra hushed her and she fell silent. The voices were scratching softly at the silence.

. . . girl . . . Nur Huda . . . you must leave us . . . go to the fountain . . . wait there . . . you will know when we have finished . . .

Nur Huda whispered, 'Should I go?'

'Yes,' Lyra whispered in return. 'Go there now and wait. I'll come and find you soon.'

The girl rose unsteadily and walked away, looking back every few steps as if to make sure Lyra was still there. The floury sand rose up like mist around her feet as she made her way out of the forum, and then settled back infinitely slowly.

Lyra waited till everything was still. Then she said into the dark, 'Who are you? Are you angels?'

. . . we are beings of another kind . . .

'Are you part of the secret commonwealth?'

. . . deeper by far than that . . . we come from the gulfs between the good numbers . . .

'The gulfs between . . . Did I hear you properly?'

No reply.

'Then tell me something else,' she said. 'Tell me what's in the red building in the desert of Karamakan. The building the roses come from.'

. . . an opening into another world . . .

Lyra was silent for a moment. The stars wheeled overhead.

'An opening – d'you mean the sort of thing Will used to call a window?'

. . . a doorway into another world . . . that is why they guard it so fiercely . . .

'The world where the roses come from?'

. . . they could come from nowhere else . . .

As simple as that, and she hadn't thought of it. A knife-bearer from Cittàgazze, long ago, must have cut that window

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in his travels from world to world, and left it open. Her grasp on things was loosening, and she felt giddy, as if she'd lost her sense of up and down, of now and of then, of here and of everywhere.

The voices said something else, but she didn't understand it.

. . . *the alkahest* . . .

'The . . . alphabet? Is that what you said?'

. . . *the alkahest* . . .

'Alkahest? What's that?'

. . . *the destroyer of bonds* . . .

She heard it clearly, and it was impossible to understand. 'What d'you mean? What about this alkahest? What is it?'

. . . *destroy everything* . . .

Lyra was bewildered. It was too much. She dragged herself back to the present task. 'Where is Nur Huda's dæmon? Where is Jamal?'

. . . *in the treasury* . . .

'And where's that?'

. . . *behind you* . . .

Lyra turned to look. The building that had stood there was now a jumbled heap of stones, with a few dry shrubs growing through them.

She said, 'Who is keeping him prisoner?'

. . . *a man who is asleep* . . .

Her eyes had become used to the moonlight; it was almost as clear as day, and she stepped easily over the stones and looked more closely at the place called the treasury. It was the sort of place where snakes might easily hide, and scorpions, and venomous spiders. Oh, there were so many things to be afraid of.

She took a deep breath and pressed her hand to her heart to slow the beating. It didn't work, of course, and she needed both hands to help her clamber over the shattered masonry, so she

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let her heart do what it wanted and moved on, hand over hand, foot carefully placed before foot. Inside her she carried the new knowledge about the red building in the desert of Karamakan like a precious vessel full to the brim with rare oil. Don't tremble, don't trip . . .

When she'd gone a little way into the rubble she saw a gap in the ground ahead, and realised it was the shaft of a great staircase leading down deep into the ground. In a treasury, where would you put the most valuable thing? In the vaults under the ground. There must be some kind of strongroom down there . . . And how was she going to open it? In the dark? With no tools?

She shrugged. It might not even be possible to reach it. But the steps that led down were not too cluttered with fallen masonry, and the moon was at just the right angle to light the way down, so she had no excuse. Right hand on the wall, left held out for balance, she made her way carefully downwards, aware all the time of the danger of slipping, twisting an ankle, or worse.

Down, and further down, and still the moonlight lit her way. At the foot of the stairway, she had to stop: the passage that led away into the dark was entirely blocked.

But there at the side, out of the shaft of moonlight, was a man lying on his back, asleep. At first she thought he was dead, he was so still, and her veins flooded with ice-water; but he was snoring quietly, and there was his dæmon, a small desert mammal of some inconspicuous kind, clinging to his shoulder in her sleep. His face had been battered and torn in what must have been a furious attack, and his left eye was missing: the socket lay empty and blood-clotted.

His right arm was resting on something at his side, and when she looked more closely she could see what it was: a crudely made cage about the size of a shoebox, nailed together from rough planks, with a heavy steel mesh front. Inside the cage was

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a dæmon, Nur Huda's dæmon, a little animal like a mouse with large ears and long back legs like those of a kangaroo. He was crouching in the darkest corner, shivering.

'Are you Jamal?' Lyra whispered.

'Yes – where is Nur Huda?' came the reply, so quiet she could hardly hear it.

'She's waiting for us. I'm going to take you back to her. Who is this man?'

'He caught me and nailed this cage up and I can't get out – he was hiding from a big bird – like an eagle – it was going to take me and he fought to get me away from it and then he put me in this cage – I'm frightened. Who are you?'

'Sssh. My name's Lyra. Keep still and don't talk. I don't want to wake him up.'

She had to reach across the man's body to touch the cage, and he stirred and groaned loudly, startling her. She kept as still as she could till he was snoring again, and then moved her hand to the cage, feeling to see if she could lift it away from his grasp. But it wasn't going to be possible unless she knelt on his chest: there was nowhere else to lean on, and unless she supported her weight somehow she'd overbalance and wake him up anyway. And her left hand was still painful after her fight with the soldiers on the train from Smyrna just two days ago.

She felt as far as she could around the cage. The wood was very dry and splintery, and the steel mesh was far too strong to bend, and stapled deeply into the wood all the way round.

She sat back to think about it.

Jamal whispered, 'Please, can you open it?'

'Sssh.'

She was aware of the moon moving across the sky: the shaft of light was moving too, and unless she got the dæmon out soon she'd have to work in the dark. If only Will . . . If only the subtle knife . . . It would cut through the mesh in a moment.

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A thousand things distracted her. The smell of the sleeping man: not just a dirty body and unwashed clothes, but something worse, like gangrene. She saw that his leg was injured as well as his eye; he'd probably die soon. The sound of something much deeper underground, the faintest possible rumble, like rocks grinding together. The stillness of the air, the closeness and clamminess down here in the vault.

A thought struck her like an arrow.

The alethiometer—

The metal of the needle—

The Welsh miners on the North Sea ferry had noticed it. So had Will, a long time before. It was the same colour, the same material, as the subtle knife.

She moved away a little further, back into the shaft of moonlight, and felt in her rucksack for the alethiometer. Its familiar weight sat in her hand so rightly, and she raised it to her cheek and held it there for a few seconds, loving it.

She'd never opened it, never tried to prise it apart, but there must be a way of doing so. The mechanism had been made by a human being, and then put in its gold case, and then the glass had been pressed shut. She could almost hear the *click* as she thought about it. Or else they'd screwed it down. If it had been closed, it could be opened.

Malcolm, the skilled mechanic, would know how to do it. What would he do? She held the body of the instrument in her aching left hand and tried to unscrew the glass as if she was unscrewing the lid of a jar. She'd watched a clockmaker in the Covered Market in Oxford unscrewing a watch glass, gently, firmly, just like that. She tried, but without success. Either it was stuck after centuries of not being moved, or it wasn't screwed at all.

And then came another memory-arrow: it was thinking of Malcolm that brought this one. He'd found a wooden acorn

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with a message in it, and couldn't open it till he tried unscrewing the wrong way, clockwise.

So she tried that.

And it worked.

The glass turned smoothly as if it had been made the day before, and after three revolutions it came away in her hand. The dial of the alethiometer, with its thirty-six tiny pictures, lay open to the moonlight. Its three black hands were pointing to the camel, the angel, and the walled garden, but the symbols didn't matter for now; it was the silver-grey needle that was important, slender, infinitely sharp, quivering in the air of Madinat al-Qamar as the air of Prague drifted away from it.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered to the heavy golden instrument, so beautiful, her companion for ten years or more, the guide that had led her safely into other worlds and into the world of the dead and then home again.

And with all the delicacy her pain-filled bones and exhausted muscles could manage, she lifted out the needle.

It came away easily from its shaft. There was so little of it – it could have weighed only a little more than a hair – that she was immediately terrified of dropping it. If that happened, she'd never find it again. She held it between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand, and they were damp with sweat and fear, so she laid it carefully on the open palm of her left and wiped her right hand on the fabric of her blouse, though that was wet too. So she rubbed her fingers instead into the dust of the floor, which did work, and then took the needle again.

'Stay at the back and keep still,' she whispered to Jamal.

The little dæmon, who'd been peering through the mesh, darted into the shadow at the back of the cage.

Lyra thought: *I don't know if this will work. But it's all there is.*

Whatever she did would depend on her left hand not giving way. She had to lean on it a little, or not reach the cage at all, but

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it hurt so much. She leaned over the sleeping man, put her left hand on the top of the cage, and very slowly let it take her weight as she reached over with her right.

Gripping the needle as firmly as she could, she pressed the side of it, just behind the point, to the steel mesh at one edge. The wire was thick and heavy, and it would have needed a bolt-cutter and a strong wrist to make any impression on it; but it parted like a cobweb.

Lyra wanted to shout with triumph, but she'd hardly started. One by one, keeping her mind on everything about the task, she cut through each of the strands of wire until the entire front fell away loose.

'Wait,' she whispered urgently, because Jamal had come to the front of the cage and looked as if he wanted to leap out at once.

But the sleeping man was stirring. He must have felt the cage shift under his hand when the front fell away. He groaned and lifted his arm – and touched Lyra's – and woke at once.

He shouted in fear and seized her wrist. His one eye glittered, open wide.

'Jamal! Run!' Lyra called, and the little dæmon sprang over them both and darted up the staircase like a spark along a fuse.

The man was struggling to sit up, because Lyra had fallen across his body, struggling against horrible pain as she tried to tug her wrist loose from his grip. Without thinking about it she realised she still had the needle in her right hand, and thrust it hard into his arm.

He cried out in anger and shock and flung her off. The stink of the gangrene, if it was that, enveloped her and made her gag – but she kept hold of the needle and pulled it away as the man rolled over and struggled to his feet. He saw the open cage and cried out, and kicked Lyra in the ribs before staggering and almost losing his balance – and then he saw the gold of the alethiometer gleaming in the last shaft of moonlight, and

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snatched it up and scrambled away up the steps too fast for her to follow.

She lay half stunned, dizzy with pain and exhaustion, winded from the kick to her chest, but with the needle still in her trembling fingers.

The curved glass she'd taken out of the alethiometer reflected a little image of the moon up at her. She scooped it up, seized her rucksack, and scrambled for the stairs, trembling in every limb, tripping, skidding on the sand that had blown down from above, trying not to cry aloud with pain and fear, dizzy with weakness, and came out into the full moonlight of the silent forum.

There was no sign of Nur Huda's dæmon. But there was the man, the Scythian, the Chorasmian, whatever he was, clutching the alethiometer to his chest as he stumbled away—

And then without any warning, in total silence, an immense shadow swept across the forum and submerged the man in darkness. As Lyra clung to the wall, unbelieving, the creature that threw the shadow swooped down on him, snatched him up in giant claws, and in a swirl of dust thrown up by its vast wings, carried him up into the sky. It had taken no more than a couple of seconds.

It was half lion, half eagle, immense and savage, and as its shape passed across the full moon Lyra saw the man struggling in its claws and heard his distant screaming. With him went the alethiometer.

But she had the glass, and the needle, though she could barely hold them. With trembling care she dropped the needle into her breast pocket and the glass into her rucksack.

Nur Huda was sitting with Jamal in her hands, talking softly and urgently, raising him to her lips and her cheeks and her ears, stroking his back, kissing him, cuddling him close.

She jumped up when she saw Lyra. Her face was brilliant with happiness.

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'This is Jamal! He's safe!' she said, and Lyra wanted to embrace her and absorb some of that joy; and then Nur Huda, clutching her dæmon close to her heart, threw her other arm around Lyra's neck and kissed her.

In doing so she crushed Lyra's left hand against her. Lyra couldn't help flinching, and Nur Huda drew away in alarm.

'You're hurt! What happened?'

'I . . . I don't know. I can't remember. How will you find your way home?'

'Jamal will find the way. No need to worry about that! With Jamal, I'm always safe. Anyway, my home is where my family is. We'll look for them and that's how we'll find a home. Like you with Pan.'

'Yes . . .'

'When you find him, will you go home?'

'I don't think I've got a home . . . I don't know. Maybe we could look for one.'

'Yes! Look for a home. That's a good idea. But the most important thing is when you find him, you must kiss him and kiss him.'

'*Will* I find him?'

'Of course!'

'And . . . will he find the thing he's looking for?'

'Of course he will. He's very good at looking. He'll find it and everything will be all right. Then you will find a home and marry someone nice. Thank you, Lyra! Thank you!'

And she turned away and began the long walk home, with her little dæmon skipping and leaping beside her. Lyra could hear their voices chattering and laughing together for some time after they vanished from sight beyond the moon-drenched colonnade.

Abdel Ionides, her guide into the desert, was sleeping when Lyra returned to their camp at the edge of the city. Quietly though she moved, he heard her and sat up.

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'Miss Silver! Your dæmon was not there?'

'He was there, but he's gone. And there were voices – they spoke about something called the alkahest . . . Have you heard of the alkahest?'

'No. Who said that, anyway?'

'I couldn't see them. Just voices.'

He shrugged and peered at her more closely and said, 'You hurt? What happen?'

'I saw a gigantic bird, like a lion . . .'

'Bird like a lion? What you mean? I think you too tired to speak any sense. Come on, lie down, go to sleep till morning. It will be very cold soon.' He shook out a blanket and laid it on a pile of several others.

She had to. There was no alternative. She felt him gently arranging the blankets over her, and then she was asleep.

She dreamed that Pan came back to her, without a word, at the darkest point of the night, and slipped under the sheepskins and found his old place around her neck.

'It's a window, Pan!' she murmured. 'Like the ones we used to go through with Will! In the red building – a window into another world! The world where the roses come from! That's what it is!'

She heard the dream-Pan whisper, but what he said was a mystery, and in her dream itself, she fell asleep.

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2

The Infirmary

Some time before Lyra arrived at the City of the Moon, the director of Oakley Street had had a visitor. The organisation had been officially disbanded, and Glenys Godwin had been ordered to retire and surrender all control of the records, files, offices, property, everything, to the Home Office.

She'd done nothing of the sort. She was determined to keep as much as she could out of the hands of the faction now running the government, and to continue the fight and uphold the principles she'd sworn to support when she joined Oakley Street as a young woman forty years before.

Since their offices had been commandeered, she and her senior team were working temporarily from a large and dingy flat near Battersea Park. No one, she thought, knew where they were; so it was a shock when the doorbell rang in the late morning and her secretary came in to say that an elderly man would like to see her. He'd given his name as Makepeace.

'Did he say anything more than that?'

'No, ma'am. But he said he'd specifically come to see you.'

'Me by name? Not just the director or the person in charge?'

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'He gave your full name.'

'What does he look like, David?'

'Seventies. Quite vigorous, though, I should think. Dusty black suit, rather shabby, but more like a retired craftsman than a vagrant, for example. His dæmon's a cat.'

'Well, I'm curious. Show him in, but stand by next door, won't you?'

She stayed at her desk as the visitor came in. The secretary's summary was accurate, but he hadn't mentioned the air of intellectual force expressed by the man's clear eyes and commanding expression, nor the faint smell of wood-smoke. The man was carrying a small battered attaché case.

'Thank you for seeing me, Mrs Godwin,' he said. His voice was educated, his tone aristocratic. 'I won't take up much of your time.'

'Do sit down, Mr Makepeace. First, how do you know my name? Second, how did you know how to find me?'

'I've been aware of Oakley Street for a long time. I knew Tom Nugent very well, and I agreed with the principles he worked for. I knew your name because he told me before he died that you would succeed him, and I knew how to find you because I've been here before, when it was used as a safe house.'

'But—'

'All you need to know is what I'm going to tell you about these things.'

He opened the attaché case and took out a brown-paper parcel about the size of a large man's fist. He opened it to reveal two flat stones, greenish-black in colour, each with one side shinier and flatter than the other.

'What are those?' said Godwin, picking one of them up and feeling its weight.

'If you have one of these, you can communicate instantaneously with the other, no matter how far they are apart. They work by

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a process of quantum entanglement, but I haven't got time to tell you how. You'll have to discover how to use them yourself. They will give you an immediate and powerful advantage over your enemies. *Our* enemies.'

'Where do they come from?'

'From another world.'

He spoke with the same sober dignity as before, his eyes steady and clear, his hands folded calmly in his lap; but . . . another world?

'I see,' she said. 'And how did they come into your possession?'

'Very simply. I saw them in a junk-shop window, and recognised them, and bought them. In the world they come from they're known as resonating lodestones.'

'And this other world . . .'

'You'll remember the Barnard-Stokes hypothesis.'

'I thought the point of that was that each world is completely unreachable from any other.'

'That was a part of the mathematics put in quite late to deceive the authorities into thinking that the many-worlds idea could have no practical application, so it could be examined theoretically without falling into heresy.'

'So if these things have come through, somehow, from their own world, there might be ways for people to do so as well?'

'Yes, but they're difficult and dangerous. Human travel is virtually impossible. But objects do find their way sometimes out of one world and into another. Chance, accident, forgetfulness.'

'Where had you seen things like this before? You said you recognised them.'

'I recognised that they hadn't come from this world. Once you've learned how to see that, it's unmistakable. It's like training your senses, the way a piano tuner learns to recognise harmonies and intervals. I had no idea what they were used for until I met a traveller who had seen them and spoken to the strange people

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who used them. I've told no one but you, but the time has come for them to be used again.'

All kinds of possibilities flickered across her mind like the figures in a phantasmagoria. He sat calm and steady, returning her gaze.

'What do you do, Mr Makepeace?'

'I used to work at what we once called experimental theology. That term seems to be going out of favour these days, so I like to let it be known that I am an alchemist.' Something changed in his expression. A little glint, a shimmer of complicity, and she knew they understood each other. He closed his briefcase. 'Time is pressing, Mrs Godwin. But I would like a receipt for these things.'

'My secretary will make one out.' She pressed a button and spoke briefly to him, before turning back to Makepeace. 'May I know where you live?'

'In Oxford, in the district they call Jericho. Juxon Street, to be precise.'

The door opened, and her secretary came in with two copies of a typed receipt, which she and Makepeace both signed.

He took his copy and stood up. They shook hands, and she came to the door with him.

'Thank you for bringing me these,' she said. 'And you think I can discover how to use them?'

'I do. And if whoever you're communicating with can find out anything at all about the alkahest, they would be doing something very valuable.'

'The alkahest? What's that?'

'A term from alchemy. Mrs Godwin, your political masters will quite soon find out this address. I think it would be wise to move before they do.'

'I've always liked the sound of Hemel Hempstead,' she said. 'Such a romantic name.'

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Another little flicker: he understood. He smiled, and nodded, and left.

'Well, David,' said Glenys Godwin to the secretary. 'Now we've got some work to do.'

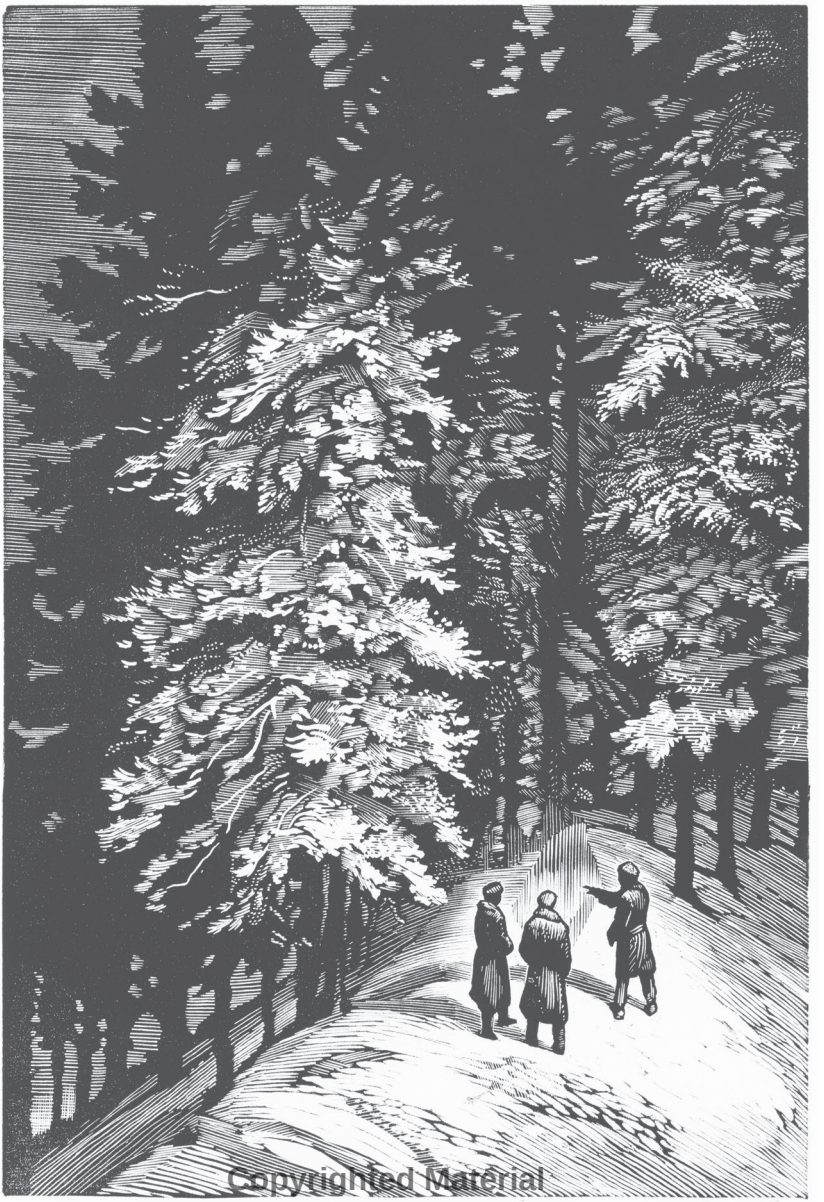
Marcel Delamare, President of the High Council of the Magisterium, didn't often leave the building in Geneva, known as *La Maison Juste*, that held his office. His comfortable apartment in a nearby building overlooking the lake, the cathedral, an occasional visit to a restaurant or a concert, and a walk along the lakeshore for his health; the world he moved in was quiet and well ordered. He hadn't been to the mountains since he was a very young man, when he'd thought that an enthusiasm for climbing would be a useful part of a well-rounded reputation.

So it had been at least twenty-five years since he had trodden the snowy paths above Les Diablerets, and he had never taken the route that led to the phenomenon he was now examining. In fact, said his guide, hardly anyone ever had. If the third man present was familiar with it, he didn't say; he said very little. Colonel Schreiber was completely at home in the mountains, and like other senior officers under the command of what used to be known as the Consistorial Court of Discipline he was used to keeping quiet. His stocky form, his Franz Joseph beard and moustache and bare chin were familiar to all those under his command.

The thing they were looking at stood among densely growing pine trees in a steep valley, and Delamare had never seen anything like it. It looked as if someone had cut a hole in the air.

It was hard to see, and in the pale afternoon light it might easily have been missed by anyone who wasn't looking for it, because the land on the other side – through the hole, so to speak – was very similar to everything around it on *this* side: pine trees, a rocky slope under snow. It was so much the same that anyone walking there might easily have missed it, not least

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because all their attention would have been focused on keeping their footing on the steep rocky slope under the snow.

'Do they all look like this, Beamish?' he said to the guide.

Hugo Beamish was a lean, grizzled, sunburned man in his forties. 'Yes, they do,' he said. 'All roughly this size, all in isolated places, not easy to get to, not easy to see.'

Delamare found a firmer footing and leaned closer. The edge of the hole in the air was clearly visible when he was close, but not so easy from a little way back. The opening was big enough for an adult man or woman to step through, and irregular in shape: no straight edges or smooth curves, more like something cut freehand and perhaps in a hurry.

'What happens when – Colonel, I wonder if you would oblige – could you go behind it, so to speak, from the side . . .' said Delamare, stepping carefully back a step or two.

Colonel Schreiber did as he was asked. Balancing lightly on the snow-covered rocks, he stepped up to the opening from the side and moved behind it. He vanished at once. His dæmon, a porcupine, hadn't gone with him, and was intensely agitated: she whimpered and rattled her quills, scuttling back and forth in front of the opening.

Delamare took a deep breath. The guide had seen this thing before, and leaned on his stick and just watched.

'Colonel? Can you hear me?'

'Yes, I can hear you, but I can't see you. Either of you.'

'Would you come back, please?'

Schreiber appeared as if he'd just stepped out from behind a building, though there was nothing to see but the steep rocky slope, the close-growing snow-covered trees.

'Stand where I am, if you please,' Delamare said, 'and watch as I go through.'

The colonel moved next to him. Delamare was conscious of a feeling something like fear, but deeper and stranger. He stepped

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up in front of the opening and looked through as he'd done a moment before, and then stepped forward and into the space behind it. His owl-dæmon went with him, but she gripped his shoulder ferociously.

He looked all around. He might have been in his own world, in Switzerland, in a forest above Les Diablerets, on a cold pale day. Everything was almost the same; but something fundamental was different, and he couldn't tell what it was.

It made him uneasy, so he stepped back through to join the other two.

'Very well,' he said. 'Now back to Geneva.'

The following morning, M. Delamare welcomed the guide to a small office not far from the central railway station. They weren't meeting at *La Maison Juste*: the President wanted to keep his visitor away from that building, for various reasons, and this anonymous and undistinguished little place, which was rented in the name of a non-existent firm of accountants, served his purpose well.

Hugo Beamish was unique among Delamare's advisers in that his background lay not in theology, or law, or finance, but in geography. He was English, and the path of his career had traced a convoluted journey from the Hampshire rectory in which he'd been born, through academic work in Cambridge and fieldwork in northern New Denmark and the Siberian Arctic, to the office of the Director of La Maison Juste, who had become the President of the new High Council of the Magisterium. Marcel Delamare had sent him on this unusual and exceptionally confidential mission two years before, seeing in Beamish a man whose diligence and taciturnity were quite out of the ordinary. He was glad to see that his confidence had been justified.

The office they met in was small, but clean and warm; the furniture was anonymous, modern, and functional; the sun was shining outside, coffee was served.

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'Now, Beamish,' said the President, 'how many of these things have you discovered?'

'Seventeen,' said the guide. 'In every part of the world. That's to say, seventeen I have personally visited. There are others I've heard about, eight to be precise, but haven't yet seen in person. All my notes, all the map references and so on, are here for you.' He indicated a bundle of five or six bulging cardboard folders, tied together with heavy cord, which lay on the low table between the two chairs.

'Pictures? Photograms?'

'The phenomenon has a strange effect on photogrammic film. I've taken pictures of what is to be seen *through* the opening, and what there is on this side, but the emulsion seems to be disturbed in some way by what happens when light from both sources falls on it. There will be a way of doing it, but I haven't succeeded yet. The pictures I have are in the files, among the other notes.'

'And how are they regarded by the local people, these doorways?'

'If they know about them at all – they often don't – they talk about them with fear and superstition. In some places they're believed to be entrances to the spirit world, something like that, and avoided and shunned. In general, very little is spoken about them – that's what made the search so difficult.'

'And did you go through in every case? Did you explore what was on the other side? I take it you weren't put off by local legends?'

'No, I went through, in each place I found. Again, the details are in the notes. The doorways I found were all in wild places, with only two exceptions, and the landscape on the other side was usually very similar, as it was with the one we saw yesterday – as if the place had been chosen for that very reason. But in every case I had a distinct impression . . .'

He looked troubled.

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'Go on,' said Delamare calmly. 'You're reporting something strange, not committing heresy. What were you going to say?'

Beamish cleared his throat and said, 'When I stepped through any of those doorways, I had the distinct impression that I was in a different world. Not like being simply in a different country, or a different climate, a different landscape – more than that. Somewhere not in this world.'

'Did your feeling at that point have a spiritual aspect?'

Beamish hesitated again. He looked troubled, and Delamare said, 'Don't forget, you were doing this on my direct orders. No possible blame can attach to you, whatever you saw, whatever you report.'

'Thank you, sir. A spiritual aspect . . . I don't know how exactly I'd know that . . . It was different in each place. That was another surprising thing. It was as if the doorways on this planet each opened into a different part of the universe altogether. Or . . . into a different universe.'

'I can see how that might be disturbing.' Delamare looked at the visitor appraisingly before standing up. 'You're looking tired, my dear Beamish,' he went on. 'A glass of apricot schnapps will soon restore your vigour.'

He poured some golden liquor into a couple of glasses.

'And did you see any living creatures in those other worlds?'

'In one I could see, in the distance, the buildings of a city, and I could never have imagined . . . The sheer size of the buildings, the shapes . . . In another there were beings, creatures, at work tilling the soil. Not nearby, you understand; each doorway was placed with some care away from settlements or roads. Lonely places, well chosen.'

'These beings or creatures – tell me about them.'

'I looked at them through my field glasses for thirty minutes or so. They were the size of small horses, but six-legged, like intelligent insects. They talked among themselves as they worked the soil. I could hear their voices very distantly.'

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'Did they have tools?'

'Yes, small ploughs or harrows, but the machinery seemed to be self-propelled, and self-directing in some way. There was a discussion at one point – one of the ploughs seemed to want to take a different course, and the insect-creatures tried to persuade it not to, but it had its way. They were gradually working their way towards the slope where I was watching, so I thought it best to come back through before they saw me.'

'Did you see any creatures anywhere that might have been human?'

'Once or twice in the distance, on a road. But too far away to see clearly, even with the field glasses.'

Delamare sat back, resting his head on the back of the sofa, and gazed at the ceiling. He had the air of being in deep thought.

After a minute he said, 'Did you anywhere, at any stage in your travels, talk to anyone about this phenomenon? I mean, a serious prolonged discussion?'

'Three times, M. le Président. Once to a Malian scholar in Tombouctou, who told me about such a doorway in the Atlas Mountains. I looked, but I could never find it. Once to some shepherds in Mongolia, who had lost some sheep to what they thought was a raiding party from . . . the other world. They didn't dare pursue and bring back their flock; they were just going to move on and avoid the place in future. And once to a spice trader in Java, who told me about a friend of his who had vanished through one such doorway and never returned.'

'You made notes of all these conversations? Names, addresses, and so on?'

'All in the files.'

'Did anyone in authority question your interest?'

'No, sir. Wherever I went it seemed to be a source of mild and rather sterile curiosity. Something that was out of the ordinary, but not fundamentally useful or interesting.'

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'And did you ask how long these things had been known about? Were they spoken of in old traditions, for example?'

'In pre-literate societies, times and dates easily become "In the time of our grandfathers" or "Since before the great fires" or "Older than the forest" – that sort of thing.'

'And are you aware of any of these things that have changed? Grown larger or smaller? Closed altogether?'

'The people who spoke about them seemed to think they had always been the same. Though, as I say, not very many people did speak about them.'

'Thank you very much, Mr Beamish. Leave your notes with me; I'll read them avidly. Let my secretary know where you're staying. I suggest you relax for a while after your travels. Take it easy for a week or two. Where are you staying?'

'At the Hôtel de la Tour.'

'Very good. I shall want to see you again, so don't go too far away, and expect me to be in touch.'

Delamare seemed to have made up his mind swiftly and decisively about something. Beamish, who had become quite fond of his doorways, and would have been happy to talk about them for longer, found himself outside in the quiet Geneva Sunday morning street wondering what he'd done, and whether it had been wise to do it.

Once he could see Beamish walking away down the street, the President pressed a buzzer on his desk. A moment later the door opened, and Colonel Schreiber came in.

'You heard?'

'Every word, M. le Président.'

'Those are the files. Take them when you go. Wait till Beamish has returned to his hotel room, and then have him arrested, and take everything of his out of the room and bring it away. Deal with him painlessly, but finally. I want him to vanish. Then I want you to read these files and bring to me a plan for destroying

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every one of those openings, wherever they are in the world. I imagine explosives would be the most effective way; try with the one we saw yesterday at Les Diablerets, and let me know the result as soon as you've done it. Let me know – word of mouth only – how small a force you could do it with, and what materials and equipment you'd need. Highest degree of confidentiality. If we need to meet in person, we shall do so here only, and not at *La Maison Juste*.'

The colonel saluted and turned to leave.

Delamare's white owl-dæmon watched him go, and then turned her head back to the President. He was watching her with a complex expression she knew well, and both loved and feared.

'Well?' she said.

'I'm beginning to see what we have to do.'

'Apart from murdering innocent geographers?'

He dismissed that with a wave of his hand.

'Things are coming together,' he said.

Lyra was dreaming of her dæmon, but in the waking world Pantalaimon could smell a river. Or maybe hear it: his senses were extremely sharp, but not necessarily distinct from one another. He existed normally in and out of a state of synaesthesia, which he was quite happy about, especially when he heard a river. Or smelled the reeds and the mud and the fresh water.

He had come a night's journey away from the dead city. He had no idea what this river might be called or where it would lead, but it was moving east as he was, and when he slipped through the reeds on the bank and saw the slow-flowing water under the stars, no wider than the Thames at Westminster, his heart lifted. The guilty sorrow that had come with him as he left Nur Huda at Madinat al-Qamar seemed to fall off like a suit of clothes, and he left it behind on the bank and slipped easily into the stream.

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He floated without effort past the poplars on the bank, past a little fishing village with its three or four boats tied up at a jetty, and the fires where people were cooking their evening meal, and their voices that carried quietly over the water.

He floated on. Perhaps this river would flow into a great lake, or even into the Caspian Sea. At some point between where he was and the distant desert of Karamakan there would be mountains, and perhaps he'd perish there, an unmeasurable distance away from that part of himself called Lyra, and she would perish in the same instant.

Luxuriating in this tragic vision, he was startled by a bird that came out of the dark and swept low over his head. He heard the beat of wings and a strangely muffled call and twisted in the water to look up, but it was gone. It couldn't have been an owl, because he wouldn't have heard the sound of its wings; he had the impression of a creature that might have been young, almost clumsy, and full of fear. And maybe not even a bird: the wrong shape, the wrong sort of cry—

And again it swept low above him, and Pan heard something almost human in its call.

He turned towards the bank, swimming quickly, and then from higher above there came a scream – then another – intensely wild, almost unearthly.

The first creature flew low again, and there seemed to be a sob in its voice, more urgent, closer, directed to him.

A warning? A cry for help?

And then more screams from high above, a volley of them, harsh and full of hate – and then something big and heavy hurtled into the first creature and drove it down into the water close by.

Pan's senses flared with confusion, but some things were clear: the second creature was a bird, a massive thing, and it stank of rotten flesh, and the first creature would be drowned

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if he didn't save it. The struggle threw up the water in all directions, and the raucous gurgling shriek from the huge bird was sickening, so close—

Then a moment when he saw clearly: the bird had seized the smaller creature in its claws, and was trying to snap at it and tear at its head. But it wasn't in its own element. The vast wings were getting waterlogged, while its beak snapped and snapped in the empty air or the water while the creature writhed and twisted to get away. If once that beak closed on it, the victim would be dead.

Pan knew about beaks. The muscles that opened them were much weaker than those that held them shut. If he could get close enough to sink his own teeth into that beak, he might be able to hold the bird underwater long enough to drown it. If he was lucky.

The bird hadn't seen him yet, but if he didn't move at once, he'd lose any surprise he might have. He twisted in a convulsion, driving himself forward. One more twist with all his strength and he was under the water, right in among the turbulence, close enough to feel the thrashing terror of the first creature as it struggled to reach up to the surface and breathe.

Pan felt his face smash against the scaly leg of the huge bird, and snapped his teeth shut on it. At once the bird screamed and let go of the first creature, who twisted up and out of its grip.

Pan coiled away in a tight full turn and then hurled himself directly into the bird's face and tore at it with claws and teeth. Then he writhed away, feinting sideways; the bird turned to follow; and Pan drove forward again, lashing his tail, whipping his spine like a snake, and seized its beak in his own powerful jaws.

But he only had the tip of it. The bird flung itself this way and that, and Pan held on, knowing he had to let go in order to seize

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it more firmly, and feeling all the strength of the creature in the slamming beat of its great wings. He could sense every pulse of its movement, and just as it raised its wings, just for that fraction of a second when it had no momentum, he let go and surged forward and closed his needle-sharp teeth further up the beak. This time he'd have to keep them there.

But it could still beat its mighty wings, waterlogged though they were, and scrape with its filthy claws, rank with the rotten flesh it had been tearing apart all its life. In its wild thrashing it nearly had Pan under the water, where it could drown him in a minute or less.

But his claws were sharp too. With all his weight hanging from its beak he tore with his claws at every part of the bird he could reach, breast, wings, throat, eyes, and still the creature went on making that obscene gurgling shriek, shaking its head trying to dislodge him, flinging itself – and him – this way and that, half in and half out of the water, on the riverbank and back in the water again, splashing, flapping, twisting.

Pan's jaw was aching with the effort, and he was gagging from the putrid stink of the bird's head so close to his lips and nose, and he'd taken several brutal blows from wings and feet. He was nearly at the end of his strength; and then he felt the bird's power leave it all at once and its body sagged away and drooped down into the water.

He had to tug and twist hard to pull his teeth out of the keratin-covered beak, and feared that he'd be drowned by the enemy he'd killed; but finally the beak broke apart in his mouth, and he fell back in the water, sore and shaken, watching the body float away into the darkness, and thought: surely Lyra must have felt this happening.

There was a flutter of smaller wings, and the first creature landed on the bank nearby. With an immense effort Pan pulled himself out of the water and lay panting on the grass.

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The moonlight showed him something he'd never seen before. She had wings, but was not a bird; and four legs and claws, like a lion, but was not a lion. She was as big as a domestic cat; her eagle-head and breast and wings were covered in feathers, the rest in fur; and like Pan, she was wounded. A deep scratch had raked along her flanks, and she was bleeding.

'I owe you my life,' she whispered.

English? She was speaking English?

'Get back in the water,' said Pan as soon as he saw her wound. 'Straightaway. You need to get that clean as soon as possible.'

'You too, then,' she said. 'But you're at home in water and I'm not. You'll have to help.'

Her voice was rich and low, her English lightly tinged with an accent that might have been Persian. Between them they managed to flush her wound free of blood and of whatever foulness the bird had left in it, and then Pan did the same for himself. The birds were still there high above, shrieking, but the noise was diminishing, as if they were moving away.

'What are they?' he said.

'*Oghâb-gorgs* from the Tien Shan mountains.'

'But that must be two thousand miles away . . . What are they doing here?'

'Looking for war. My name is Gulya. What is yours? And you are a dæmon. Why are you solitary?'

'I am Pantalaimon, the dæmon of Lyra Silvertongue. I am going to the desert of Karamakan to look for something she has lost. What did you say about those birds?'

'The *oghâb-gorgs* have come to find a war. Possibly they sense a war coming towards them. They can smell flowing blood across five thousand leagues of steppe and desert.'

'I can still hear them. Are they fighting one another?'

'No. My kin are fighting them off. We do not allow such filth anywhere near us.'

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Pan lay still and listened to the distant commotion high above. The most raucous cries were quieter now, and the centre of the fight was moving away.

He said, 'Who are your kin? What kind of creature are you?'

'A gryphon. I am no bigger than this because I am under a curse. I am seventy years old, but until I kill the sorcerer who cursed me, I shall never grow to full size.'

'How long do gryphons live?'

'Several hundred years.'

'And how big is full size?'

'Bigger than the largest horse in the world.'

'How do you come to speak English?'

'I speak every language.'

'And your kingdom . . . This is your kingdom, here?'

'Our kingdom extends from the Black Sea to Kamchatka, from Himmaleh to Taymyr. That is the outer kingdom. The inner kingdom is even greater, and includes the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars.'

'The inner is bigger than the outer?'

'That is the way of all things.'

Pan thought about that. He could see how that might be true.

'Listen,' said Gulya. 'They have fled.'

The sky was silent. On the ground and in the undergrowth along the river little creatures were beginning to stir, as if they'd been terrified into stillness while the combat was going on above. Then Pan heard something else: the beating of great wings, the rush of air through feathers, and a single long scream of triumph.

Gulya looked up and spread her wings, beating them hard, shaking the last drops of water off them. He saw both her intense pride and her incurable shame, and felt a pulse of admiration for her.

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'Wait here,' she said. 'Hold yourself calm, and bow with respect when they land. Say nothing until you're asked.'

Then she sprang up on her lion feet and leaped into the air, circling above the river, catching the faint breeze, her little form climbing higher and disappearing into the dark.

Pan lay on the bank, loosening his muscles as much as he could, taking in his injuries and the particular form of his fatigue. He stretched, flexing his spine, working his jaw, and he wondered what he could say to Gulya's kin, and how much he should conceal.

A few minutes passed. Then he heard voices in the air, and a rush of wind, and then two – three – four immense beasts landed on the grass. Pan could see their great wingtips spread like fingers against the starry sky, their lion feet grasping the soil, their savage eyes glaring red as they sought him out among the shadows. They stood facing him like stone sculptures that had just stepped down from a Persian temple. He didn't have to remember how to behave: he stood because he couldn't help it, and bowed his head because he was overwhelmed.

Last of all came little Gulya, sweeping down between him and the others. She tilted her body up and beat her wings inwards, and hovered a moment before dropping to the grass as lightly as a wren.

'Pantalaimon,' said one of the gryphons; Pan couldn't see which. The voice, coming as it did through an eagle's throat with the power of a lion's chest, seemed to make the ground tremble as much as the air.

Pan bowed his head again, from politeness, but then raised it high and gazed from one to another of the mighty forms.

'I am Pantalaimon,' he said, thinking that he mustn't let Lyra down. He must show all the confidence and presence of her at her best. 'I want to thank you for fighting off those birds, whose name I can't remember. I hope none of you were wounded in the combat.'

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'Say less,' said Gulya quietly.

'What has Lyra Silvertongue lost?' asked one of the gryphons.

It wasn't easy to see which of them was speaking, nor whether it was the same speaker as before, nor whether the speaker was male or female, nor whether he or she had some kind of authority over the others.

'Her imagination,' he said.

'Why do you think it is in Karamakan?'

'I have searched all Europe for it in vain. I have spoken to the author of a book that made it flee, and found that he knew nothing. I know that the enemies of the imagination are gathering their forces to invade the desert of Karamakan, and I believe they think that something in that desert nurtures the imagination and allows it to flourish, so they are going to destroy it whatever it is, and wherever they find it. I want to find Lyra's imagination and save it from them, and with its help, with her help, with her, I want to defend the imagination and fight its enemies.'

He worried that he'd said too much, but he could hardly have explained it in fewer words. When he'd finished he stood still, trying to look into those terrifying red eyes, and having to drop his gaze more than once; but he always raised it again, and faced them.

'What is this imagination?' said a different gryphon voice. 'Gulya, what do you know?'

'I believe it is a way of seeing. To see as we do, not as worms do.'

'Is that your understanding, Pantalaimon?' said the first gryphon.

'Yes. My person Lyra Silvertongue saw like that once. She saw everything and everyone in a light of gold. She saw correspondences and analogies and echoes and resemblances, so that nothing existed without a thousand connections to the world, and I saw them with her. For her the world was rich with

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meaning and alive with delight. Then little by little this way of seeing left her, so I set off to find it and bring it back.'

'Where is she now?'

'I don't know. I hope she is safe. I know she is alive, because otherwise I would be dead. I am her. She is me. We are one being, and we disagreed, and we were very unhappy.'

'How will you travel to Karamakan?'

'As I have travelled so far. Along the surface of the earth.'

'Your enemies are moving faster.'

'Then I must waste no time.'

'Why did you save Gulya? You might easily have left her to the *oghâb-gorgs*, with no dishonour.'

'I beg your pardon, but I don't know how to address you. How should I do that?'

'You say, Your Excellency.'

'Thank you. Well, Your Excellency, to answer your question I shall have to disagree with you. To leave Gulya at the mercy of that creature would have been a matter of great dishonour.'

'But you did not know who she was.'

'I would have saved any creature rather than lose honour.'

This caused the four gryphons to murmur together, to move closer to one another, to bend their heads together. Pan felt a curious combination of emotions: pride, in saying the words he'd just said and finding that he meant them; apprehension, for he had not the slightest idea how the great creatures would react to this little English-speaking dæmon; and love, love for Lyra, love for Nur Huda, love for Gulya. But it wasn't complex, it was simple. These were all one thing.

The gryphons turned to face him again.

'We want to know more about this imagination. It seems to us that it is a matter of concern for every creature in our worlds. You must come with us and explain everything you can to our queen.'

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That voice seemed to come from one who hadn't spoken before. It was lighter and more musical, and even sympathetic.

Pan gathered his courage and said, 'But, Your Excellencies, I have a task to do, and I must not step aside from it. I would be honoured to speak to your queen, but if it means losing a single day on my journey, I must respectfully say no.'

This time it was Gulya who replied, and as she spoke she sprang into the air and flew around, beating her wings in rage.

'What do you think you're saying? How dare you be so insolent! I won't have it. If you are invited to visit Her Celestial Majesty Queen Shahrnavāz you do NOT refuse! Now you must apologise and beg to withdraw your refusal. Do so at once!'

And she landed on the grass in front of him, bristling with such fury that she seemed to throw out little darts of it, invisible sparks that scorched the air as they flew and stung him like bees.

It would have been funny, but he was so tired. He wanted to sleep for a thousand years. So he bowed to the little gryphon, and to her companions, and said, 'I beg your pardon, Your Excellencies. I have learned a lesson tonight. I will gladly visit your queen and answer any questions she has. My only questions to you are: how shall I make that journey, and how far is it?'

'Climb on to my back,' said the gryphon who'd spoken last, and she knelt to make it possible.

Pan sprang up, and found her back broad and muscular and warm. He lay between her wings, where the eagle's feathers gave way to the lion's fur, and felt a mighty surge of power and movement as she leaped up into the star-filled sky. He felt utterly safe, and exhilarated, and full of wonder; and a moment later he fell into the deepest sleep of his life.

In the garrison town of Küçüklü in the south-east of Anatolia there was a military prison, and the prison had a small infirmary, where captives uncooperative enough to resist torture were sent

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to reflect on their obstinacy. If they didn't seem inclined to do that, the infirmary was, after all, a convenient place to die.

Some weeks after Sebastian Makepeace's visit to Battersea, in fact on the very night when Lyra was rescuing Nur Huda's dæmon over a hundred miles to the south, a young man lay in the Küçüklü infirmary, half conscious and sweating with pain. He'd been discovered unconscious on the train when it made an unscheduled stop, and he was clearly a criminal; no innocent person, having been shot, would have tried to conceal his wound like that unless he wanted to avoid the attention of the police.

Accordingly, Malcolm Polstead was taken directly to the prison hospital, where if he'd had the slightest sense of responsibility he would have died promptly. He'd lost quite enough blood.

However, he was clearly stubborn as well as criminal, and unusual too, for a man of violence. The prison governor was new to his job, with enough spare intelligence to have cultivated an interest in archaeology, and he was intrigued by the papers discovered in Malcolm's pocket, listing his scholarly credentials. A fellow archaeologist!

He brushed his neat military moustache upwards and sent for the medical orderly at once.

'That fellow Peters, the man who was shot. The Englishman.'

'What about him?' said the orderly. 'Colonel.'

The insolence was only in the timing, but it was there.

'Is he losing a lot of blood?'

'Yeah. Won't be with us long.'

'I want him seen by a specialist. He might need a transfusion. Where's Dr Osman?'

'Gone home.'

'Send for him at once. Then come with me to the infirmary.'

Five minutes later the governor was standing by the only occupied bed of the six in the squalid room, while his canary-dæmon perched on the iron frame. The yellow light sifting

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through the dust on the feeble bulbs overhead didn't illumine very much, but it was enough to show the dirt on the headboard, the stains on the linen, and the prisoner's blood already coagulating on the floor tiles. The man's face was dreadfully pale, his red-gold hair dark with sweat. His cat-dæmon lay on the pillow beside his head, barely breathing.

'I found the doc,' said the orderly.

'Ah, good, good. Doctor, have you examined this man?

'Of course I have.' Dr Osman was irritated; he had been going to take his wife to the opera, and this delay would make him late. His lemur-dæmon looked sulky.

'Has his wound been dressed?' the governor demanded.

'Yes, yes.'

'Then why is he still bleeding?'

'It's a serious wound. I'd be surprised if he lives to eat his breakfast. Now can I—'

'No. See to this wound at once. Dress it again, and better. And then see about a blood transfusion.'

'A blood transfusion? Here?'

'If he loses any more blood—'

'Impossible. We can't do that. We haven't got the equipment, we haven't got the staff, we haven't got the blood. What's it matter anyway? Who is he?'

'An English archaeologist.'

'Too bad. He shouldn't be travelling here, should he. Looting, no doubt. Serve him right.'

'I want you to arrange for him to be transferred to the Memorial Hospital. Immediately.'

'They won't accept him. You remember we tried before with the murderer who blew his own legs off. Sent back three times, because they wouldn't allow an armed guard on duty with him, and you wouldn't let him go without one. As if he was likely to run away.'

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'A very different case. This man is not a criminal, he doesn't need a guard, and I do not want him to die here. Kindly do as I ask. Dress his wound and arrange for him to be taken to the hospital.'

The doctor's dæmon snarled at the governor's, who raised her wings in protest.

'At once,' the governor added. 'And, you,' he added to the orderly, 'clean this floor. Then get him ready for the ambulance.'

Muttering, taking off his coat and gloves, the doctor set about dressing the prisoner's wound. To judge by the look of it, the previous dressing had been put on by the orderly. The governor winced. The orderly fetched a mop and a bucket while the governor gazed down at the prisoner's broad face, the damp curls of his hair like gold coins, and the too-tight prison pyjamas.

'Where are his clothes?'

'In there,' said the orderly, jerking his thumb at a row of steel lockers.

The governor tried to open the only one that was closed, and found that it opened anyway, because the lock was bent out of position. Inside he found a bundle of bloodstained clothes and a rucksack.

'Has anyone checked this rucksack?' he asked.

'Yeah, me. That's where his papers were.'

The governor knew better than to ask what else had been in there; if it was valuable, the orderly would have stolen it already. The rucksack itself was battered, dusty, faded. One of the buckles had been replaced with another that didn't match the remaining two.

'I thought you said the papers were in his pocket.'

'Can't remember.'

The orderly knocked against the bed frame with the handle of his mop, and the prisoner groaned.

'Be careful,' snapped the governor, and bent forward to look more closely. The prisoner was frowning in his sleep. His brow

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was damp, and his dæmon was twitching and extending her claws, no doubt because of a dream.

The governor emptied the rucksack on to the cleanest-looking bed. It contained nothing but a spare shirt and underclothing, socks, a book in some foreign language, a paper bag containing strips of dried meat, a small flask of some kind of alcoholic liquor, a copy of an English-language magazine called *The Economist*, and that was it. No archaeology.

'He must have another bag, another case, something else . . . Are you sure this was all he had with him?'

'Far as I know.'

The governor turned to the clothes in the locker, and found nothing in the pockets but a handkerchief. The man seemed to have hardly any possessions at all. Of course, anything interesting or valuable would have been taken by the soldiers who found him, or the police who'd brought him to the prison, or the admission staff.

After another look at the prisoner, the governor went back to his office and read through the papers again.

'Martin Peters,' he said aloud. 'Doctor Martin Peters.'

His dæmon said, 'He's in a bad way.'

'Well, we'll have to wait and see. Nothing more we can do now.'

The governor drummed his fingers on the desk, looked at his watch, tidied the Englishman's papers again, strolled to the window, which was one of very few in the administration buildings that had a view of the street, and failed to see an ambulance anywhere in the dense traffic.

'I bet he hasn't contacted the hospital,' said his dæmon.

'But why wouldn't he? I gave him an order.'

'He'd say that medical matters were his concern, not yours.'

The governor sighed. 'Have we ever dealt with a more idle and uncooperative staff? Mulish. Not a single one of them with any—'

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The medical orderly opened the door and came in without knocking. 'He's dead,' he said.

'What?'

'Oh, didn't you hear me? I said he's dead.'

'What, Peters? The Englishman?'

'Him in the bed down there.'

'What happened? Did he say anything? Did he wake up?'

'I dunno what happened. Nothing happened. I was finishing off the floor and I suddenly noticed his dæmon was gone. So that's it, innit. He's dead.'

The governor pushed past him angrily and set off at a run. When he reached the staircase he stopped and said, 'Why am I running?'

'Because you think he might not be dead,' said his dæmon.

'Well . . . H'mm.'

It was because the man was an archaeologist, that was all. The governor had been looking forward to some civilised conversation.

He went on downstairs quite carefully. There would be reports to write, forms to fill in, information to seek. It was curious, though, the man's situation. He must have been attacked, but why conceal the wound? He was possibly involved in smuggling antiquities, as the doctor had said so cynically. That was not impossible, if reckless at the present time. And his documents – forged, no doubt.

Pity. The governor would have liked the chance to interrogate the man, because he was convinced that his own method of gentle friendly enquiry was more effective than the robust techniques that were officially approved. He might have prevented, or even solved, a major crime.

The infirmary was even more dismal than before because the afternoon light was fading fast. The man's body lay just as it had done earlier, eyes closed, arms by his sides, head resting

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on the greasy pillow. The dæmon had gone. What form had she had? The governor tried hard to remember. Cat? Could have been.

He looked under the bed, but only for the sake of form. The floor was newly washed, but patchily, and not rinsed properly. There was nothing else to see.

'What is it? What's the matter?' he said to his dæmon, who was perching on the iron frame at the end of the bed, uttering little soft whimpers of fear.

'Something's wrong,' she said.

'Oh, come on, we've seen a dead body before—'

'His eyes are open.'

They were, and looking at him.

The governor uttered a yelp of terror and leaped backwards, stumbling and then falling back on to the next bed.

'What's the matter?' said the orderly, who had just come in.

It was galling to know that the fool must have seen his undignified sprawl on the bed. The governor struggled up and turned to face him.

'Where's his dæmon, damn you?' he shouted.

The orderly blinked and shrugged. There was the hint of a smirk on his face. 'Told you, she's gone. Vanished, like they do.'

'Look! He's not dead, you shit-brained ape! She must be around! Must be close! Find her! Don't stand there goggling like a frog – damn you, look for her!'

The orderly, as frightened as the governor now, backed away as he'd done, and bent to pick up his fluttering, cackling hen-dæmon.

'I swear it – she en't here – I looked all over—'

'You lying mongrel! Get out and search the whole wing! Now!'

The governor was conscious that the man on the bed, whoever he was, had heard and seen everything. He wasn't dead. And yet he had no dæmon. The ancient fear of the uncanny, older

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than history, probably even older than language, had the governor's heart in its grip.

The man on the bed was opening his mouth. He wanted to say something, but his throat was parched. The governor looked around quickly, found a dirty cup, and filled it from the shower in the corner. Mastering his fear, and admiring his own resolution in doing so, he helped the Englishman sit up and held the cup to his lips.

'*Merci*,' the man said.

'*Vous êtes Français*?'

The prisoner seemed to consider. '*Non*,' he said. '*Anglais*.'

'That was what I thought,' said the governor, in English. 'And your name?'

The man swallowed more of the water, which was faintly brown and smelled of some strong disinfectant. 'Peters,' he said. 'Martin Peters. Where am I? Who are you?'

'I am the governor of this prison, Mr Peters. Dr Peters. We have examined your papers.'

'Why am I in a prison?'

'There are civil disturbances in the city. It was felt that you would be safer here than in the hospital.'

'Am I a prisoner, then?'

'Never mind that. When I examined you earlier there was no doubt that you were alive. Your dæmon was present. Now she has vanished; my staff and I are puzzled, to say the least.'

'Oh, has she gone? I thought so. Why does my hip hurt so much?'

'You were shot. Don't you remember that?'

'No. The last thing I remember was going down a staircase in an empty house.'

'Where was this house?'

'In Antalya.'

'That's a long way away.'

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'Was there a train? Did someone put me on a train?'

He was trying to sit up. The governor, overcoming his reluctance to touch such an unnatural being, put another pillow behind him, first turning it round to put the cleaner surface on top.

'You were found on a train, certainly, but—'

'Why did they bring me to a prison?'

'Please don't concern yourself about that. This is the infirmary. You're having the best of care.'

The wounded man looked around. The governor could see quite well what he thought of the place.

'The best care we can manage to give you,' the governor enlarged. 'These are difficult times.'

'Where are my clothes?'

'We have them safe. They are soaked in blood, of course.'

'I would like to have them, and washed, if possible. Can someone clean them for me?'

'Yes, we shall do that. But—'

'And then I shall leave.'

'It's not as simple as that, I'm afraid. There are procedures to be followed, higher authorities to be consulted, assurances to be sought. Regrettably this is not a hotel, Dr Peters. It is a prison, which, however, we do try to make civilised and not too unpleasant. While you are here—'

'No, no, wait. If I am a prisoner, I need to know what offence I'm supposed to have committed, and I need to talk to a lawyer. If I can't do that, I shall leave.'

The governor was saddened. Furthermore, he could still not quite believe he was talking to a man who was dead. There was a little hum of fear in his head that wouldn't go away.

'It will all be sorted out without difficulty,' he said in his most soothing voice. 'I guarantee that I and my staff will do everything we can to see you on your way as soon as possible,

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and in a much improved state of health. I simply cannot allow a man with a wound like yours to risk travelling at this time. A few days' rest, some nourishing food, some dedicated medical care—'

'I'm too weak to argue,' murmured Malcolm.

'And there is the difficulty caused by – by the absence of your, er, your dæmon . . . You know how people . . . And the staff here are frankly very likely to be alarmed . . . They are credulous peasants, most of them. Of course I shall give orders, and they will be obeyed, but . . .'

'Yes, I understand.'

'Has this ever . . . Forgive me, but has such a thing ever happened to you before?'

'It's not an unknown phenomenon. You are wearing a military uniform. You have seen battle, I take it?'

'Well, not recently, but what has that to do with . . .'

Malcolm was fully conscious now. Despite the pain, he was thinking quite clearly.

'You haven't encountered post-traumatic cytokinesis?' he said.

Of course the governor hadn't. 'Oh, so this is a case of . . . I see. That does explain it. Still alarming, of course, to those unused to it . . .'

'My dæmon will return stage by stage. There's really nothing to be alarmed about. In the meantime I would be grateful for a cleaner bed, and for someone medically qualified to attend to my wound.'

'Ah. Well, there I've thought ahead. You seem to have lost so much blood that I thought a transfusion might be necessary. We can't do it here, obviously, so I've sent to the Memorial Hospital for advice and assistance, and they should . . . They might get back to us quite soon.'

'And a cleaner bed?'

'Mm. On thinking about it . . . Let me see what I can do.'

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The governor left his prisoner there in the dusty gold half-light and bustled away. Being unable to stay awake, Malcolm closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Asta, his dæmon, had never found it difficult to escape from enclosed spaces. The military prison might as well have been made of mist. While the governor was talking to that part of herself called Malcolm, Asta was stepping silently from shadow to shadow in the heart of Küçüklü. She and Malcolm had discussed this as they lay in the infirmary pretending to sleep, and it was clear to them both that Malcolm wasn't going to be able to move for some time; so the big ginger cat-dæmon pressed herself into the darkness by the door, and as soon as the orderly came in, she slipped past his legs and out of the room. Ten minutes later she had discovered what she wanted to know.

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3

Towards Aleppo

When Lyra woke up under the sheepskins it was to find the sun not yet risen, the stars not quite all absorbed back into the sky. The air was very cold. From where she lay she could see the sleeping form of Abdel Ionides, and the camels slumbering on their folded legs, and the outline of the ruins of Madinat al-Qamar stark and still against the horizon.

She'd have liked nothing more than to lie there half asleep, clutching the dream of Pan to her breast, but there were private things she wanted to attend to before Ionides awoke. The cold was piercing, and her hand throbbed unmercifully, but she felt clean and empty and calm, and she knew the secret of the red building.

She wrapped herself up again and watched the dawn take over the sky.

There were no birds to sing in that wilderness; the only sounds that came to her were a subdued occasional snuffle from one of the camels and the quiet breathing of Ionides. The air was still, so there was not even the whisper of sand grains shifting over one another.

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She thought again about what had happened in the moon-washed forum, and then deep in the treasury, and afterwards when she spoke to Nur Huda beside the fountain. It felt now as if everything she'd done and said in the City of the Moon had taken place in a state of delirium. She sent her blessings to Nur Huda and her little jerboa-dæmon, to guard her and wish her well on her journey home, and although she felt a helpless little sob from part of herself, knowing that the alethiometer was gone for ever, there was also a curious relief . . . A sob from part of herself? How many parts did she have? Was Pan aware of what she'd done? He was a part of herself too, or she was a part of him. Perhaps he wasn't far away. Perhaps he was waiting in the desert near Aleppo. She, or part of herself, was also feeling a distinct excitement, a tingle of expectation and hope. And there was that dream . . . And the warning, if it was a warning, about something called the alkahest . . . There were so many things to find out!

Dawn was coming, and it came quickly: unlike the gradual reluctant sunrise of the high latitudes, it seemed to arrive between two blinks of an eye. The camels were shifting. Ionides must have heard them, because he turned over and sat up smoothly. Lyra saw his dæmon scamper up the rock beside him and stretch herself in the first rays of the sun.

'You awake, Miss Silver,' he said, not as a question. 'You beat me to it. How was your visit to Madinat al-Qamar? Did you find news of your dæmon, I venture to ask?'

As he spoke he rose to his feet and flicked out his blankets, laying them over the rock, brushing them clear of sand. His voice was as clear as that of an actor on a stage: not loud, just brightly audible.

'No,' she said.

'Ah.'

While he went behind the rock, presumably to empty his bladder, Lyra took off the shirt she'd been wearing and changed

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it for another, carefully transferring the alethiometer needle from one pocket to the other. Then she tried to tidy her hair. She was aware of how wild she must look, not that she was concerned very much about that; but something had lightened in her. She longed for a shower.

She crouched by the fire, which Ionides had banked against the night, and began to move pieces of wood around, hoping to rouse it into flame.

'Miss Silver! What you doing? This is my job. You employ me to make fires, to cook, all that, not to sit like a pasha watching while you put this one out!'

He bustled her aside and bent to correct her clumsy efforts.

'Look, see this, the flame want to go this way. You draw it, you give it energy, you help it. See this wood?' It was a gnarled and prickly twig with drops of resin oozing through the bark. 'This is your friend. This is your best servant. Like a shepherd has a dog – you have the redthorn. You save two, three pieces at night, you keep them close to hand, you watch till the little baby flames flicker up the height of one fingernail, and then . . .'

Like a candy-seller pulling sugar out of the air he twined and twisted the redthorn in the little flames, and soon he was able to pull them upwards, stretching them, twisting them like yarn, and touching them down on another stick. Before long the fire was blazing securely. Ionides thrust the end of the redthorn in the sand to put it out, and handed it to her before settling the pot on the fire to boil for coffee. Lyra put the charred twig into her pocket.

'When you come back last night,' he said, squatting back on his heels, 'you tell me you see a gigantic bird like a lion, or a lion like a bird. Naturally I think you are briefly out of your mind.'

'You've never seen anything like that?'

'Never. Such things are said to exist, but if at all, only in the mountains of the Elburz.'

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'They're not the birds you told me about before? The *oghâb-gorgs*?'

'No, no. Those are mere savages. The kind you describe is very noble, very proud. Some people say they are spirits, some people don't believe in them at all, other people say they do exist, but only in stories. I don't know English word for them. In French they are called *griffon*.'

'Gryphon,' said Lyra. 'Same word in English, almost. I wonder what he was doing in al-Khan al-Azraq.'

'Looking for gold, maybe. They love gold. If anyone steal their gold, they chase them to the end of the earth.'

So the one-eyed man had been taken up into the sky for the sake of the gold of the alethiometer in his hand. But he hadn't had it for more than a few seconds; the gryphon can't have been pursuing him for that. Perhaps he had more gold in his pockets.

'You see any dæmons in there?' Ionides went on.

'Yes. But not mine.'

'You want to try again?'

'No. My dæmon's not there. He was there, but he left.'

'So you had some news, anyway. Where did he go?'

'East. Further east.'

'You know where?'

She said, 'Yes,' but she hesitated, and then wished she hadn't.

He was too acute to miss it.

'If you know where, you will want to follow him, no?'

'I know where in general terms. Not exactly. East is a big place.'

'East is a big place,' he repeated, uttering the words without any mockery, but she could see the enjoyment in his eyes.

He adjusted the pot on the fire and passed Lyra a bag of dates. She ate one; it was intensely sweet.

'Aleppo is east,' said Ionides.

'He won't be in Aleppo.'

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'We shall be there tomorrow morning. What will you do then?'

'I shall go to Marletto's Café.'

That surprised him. 'You know Marletto's? How you know that place?'

'I know more than you think,' she said, and put another date in her mouth; they'd be nourishing, at least.

'Who you going to see at Marletto's?'

'Depends who's there.'

'And then what?'

He poured some boiling water into the coffee pot and stirred the dark drink briskly with a twig whose end had been split several times to make a rough brush. When the froth reached the rim of the vessel, he added a pinch of something he took from a screw of paper.

'What's that?' Lyra asked.

He held it out. It looked like salt. She took a small pinch and found that it was.

'You didn't notice when I put salt in before?' he said.

'I wasn't capable of noticing anything very much.'

'And now you are?'

'Yes. Why do you put salt in coffee? Most people put sugar.'

'Make the coffee taste better. Plenty sugar in the dates. You want me to make some bread? Very quick. Very nice.'

'No, thank you. The dates and the coffee are fine.'

'Full of nourishment. When you ready, we go. We leave this melancholy place. What kind of dæmons you see in there?'

As he packed everything on the camels' backs she told him a lot of lies about what she'd seen and done in the Blue Hotel. She didn't mention Nur Huda. It felt strange to be lying again, or storytelling, at least; the endless facility she'd had as a child was a marvel to her now. Making it up wasn't hard, but making it convincing was. If Pan were with her, he could have helped by supplying details, prompting, pretending to qualify or

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correct . . . She wondered, as she spoke, whether that was what he'd meant by imagination.

Ionides listened with close attention. He seemed to find her nonsense both illuminating and probable; but when she was securely on her camel and he on his, he said, 'Miss Silver, you are being satirical.'

'Oh, you don't believe me?'

'Not one word. But your story is very good.'

'Mr Ionides, what is the alkahest?'

'The what?'

She said it again. 'Something told me about it. Have you ever heard the word before?'

'No. Never.'

'It sounds sort of Arabic . . . What do you think the imagination is?'

'Why you ask me?'

'Because you're here. But what do you think the imagination is?'

'You don't think I tell the truth?'

'Not all the time.'

He laughed, and she found herself joining in. Then she said, 'You haven't answered the question.'

'Ah, is very difficult.'

'We have plenty of time.'

'Plenty of time for such a question? How many years you think people talk about this? And you want me to tell just like that, flash bang?'

They had joined the rough road along which they'd come the night before. Ionides turned his camel's head eastwards, and Lyra's followed.

'Well, you could tell me what you think,' she said, 'and I could consider it and then tell you what I think about your answer, and we could keep ourselves amused for hours.'

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The morning air was pleasant in her lungs; the sun was warm but not yet hot. The movement of the camel under her felt steadier than it had done at first, so she must be getting used to it. The aches and pains of various kinds were still there, but subdued, and even her broken hand was a little less swollen, a little more mobile. Ionides had noticed.

'You look different, Miss Silver,' he said. They were riding side by side, and it was easy to talk.

'I feel different.'

'Something happen in Madinat al-Qamar, no?'

'That's right.'

'Something real, not imagination?'

'Well, you see, that's interesting already. You mean, if it's imagined, it can't be real? What about the other way round: if it's real, it can't be imagined? They're complete opposites. Is that what you mean?'

'This is your game, Miss Silver, not mine. I am a simple man. I don't know the rules. If something look real, is it real?'

'It depends on—'

'No, it doesn't depend. If it look real in every way, is it real?'

'Yes. I suppose it is. Until you find out it isn't.'

'No, you won't find that. It look real, it taste real, it smell real, the right weight, the right size, everything you can see or feel about it is just like what it should be. Is that real?'

'Yes, then. It must be.'

'Then if somebody say to you, this is not real. You think it's real, it look and feel and weigh like everything it should be, but it's not real. What would you say to that person?'

'I'd want to know why they thought that.'

'You wouldn't believe them ever?'

She had to think about that. What would Gottfried Brande say? The only thing that counted for him was hard evidence

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