

NORTHERN
LIGHTS
HIS DARK MATERIALS

PHILIP PULLMAN

 SCHOLASTIC



Scholastic Children's Books
An imprint of Scholastic Ltd
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London, NW1 1DB, UK
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First published by Scholastic UK Ltd, 1995
This edition published by Scholastic UK Ltd, 2013

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ISBN 978 1407 13975 3

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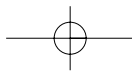
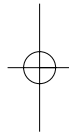
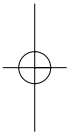
*Into this wild abyss,
The womb of nature and perhaps her grave,
Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire,
But all these in their pregnant causes mixed
Confusedly, and which thus must ever fight,
Unless the almighty maker them ordain
His dark materials to create more worlds,
Into this wild abyss the wary fiend
Stood on the brink of hell and looked a while,
Pondering his voyage...*

John Milton: *Paradise Lost*, Book II

NORTHERN LIGHTS is the first part of a story in three volumes. The first volume is set in a universe just like ours, but different in many ways. The second volume, THE SUBTLE KNIFE, moves between three universes: the universe of NORTHERN LIGHTS; the universe we know; and a third universe, which differs from ours in many ways again. The final volume of the trilogy, THE AMBER SPYGLASS, moves between several universes.

Note: the word *dæmon*, which appears throughout the book, is to be pronounced like the English word “demon”.

Part One
Oxford



1

The Decanter of Tokay



Lyra and her dæmon moved through the darkening Hall, taking care to keep to one side, out of sight of the kitchen. The three great tables that ran the length of the Hall were laid already, the silver and the glass catching what little light there was, and the long benches were pulled out ready for the guests. Portraits of former Masters hung high up in the gloom along the walls. Lyra reached the dais and looked back at the open kitchen door and, seeing no one, stepped up beside the high table. The places here were laid with gold, not silver, and the fourteen seats were not oak benches but mahogany chairs with velvet cushions.

Lyra stopped beside the Master's chair and flicked the biggest glass gently with a fingernail. The sound rang clearly through the Hall.

"You're not taking this seriously," whispered her dæmon. "Behave yourself."

Her dæmon's name was Pantalaimon, and he was currently in the form of a moth, a dark brown one so as not to show up in the darkness of the Hall.

"They're making too much noise to hear from the kitchen,"

Lyra whispered back. "And the Steward doesn't come in till the first bell. Stop fussing."

But she put her palm over the ringing crystal anyway, and Pantalaimon fluttered ahead and through the slightly open door of the Retiring Room at the other end of the dais. After a moment he appeared again.

"There's no one there," he whispered. "But we must be quick."

Crouching behind the high table, Lyra darted along and through the door into the Retiring Room, where she stood up and looked around. The only light in here came from the fireplace, where a bright blaze of logs settled slightly as she looked, sending a fountain of sparks up into the chimney. She had lived most of her life in the College, but had never seen the Retiring Room before: only Scholars and their guests were allowed in here, and never females. Even the maidservants didn't clean in here. That was the Butler's job alone.

Pantalaimon settled on her shoulder.

"Happy now? Can we go?" he whispered.

"Don't be silly! I want to look around!"

It was a large room, with an oval table of polished rosewood on which stood various decanters and glasses, and a silver smoking-mill with a rack of pipes. On a sideboard nearby there was a little chafing-dish and a basket of poppy-heads.

"They do themselves well, don't they, Pan?" she said under her breath.

She sat in one of the green leather armchairs. It was so deep she found herself nearly lying down, but she sat up again and tucked her legs under her to look at the portraits on the walls. More old Scholars, probably: robed, bearded and gloomy, they stared out of their frames in solemn disapproval.

"What d'you think they talk about?" Lyra said, or began to

say, because before she'd finished the question she heard voices outside the door.

"Behind the chair – quick!" whispered Pantalaimon, and in a flash Lyra was out of the armchair and crouching behind it. It wasn't the best one for hiding behind: she'd chosen one in the very centre of the room, and unless she kept very quiet...

The door opened, and the light changed in the room: one of the incomers was carrying a lamp, which he put down on the sideboard. Lyra could see his legs, in their dark green trousers and shiny black shoes. It was a servant.

Then a deep voice said, "Has Lord Asriel arrived yet?"

It was the Master. As Lyra held her breath she saw the servant's dæmon (a dog, like almost all servants' dæmons) trot in and sit quietly at his feet, and then the Master's feet became visible too, in the shabby black shoes he always wore.

"No, Master," said the Butler. "No word from the Aërodock, either."

"I expect he'll be hungry when he arrives. Show him straight into Hall, will you?"

"Very good, Master."

"And you've decanted some of the special Tokay for him?"

"Yes, Master. The 1898, as you ordered. His Lordship is very partial to that, I remember."

"Good. Now leave me, please."

"Do you need the lamp, Master?"

"Yes, leave that too. Look in during dinner to trim it, will you?"

The Butler bowed slightly and turned to leave, his dæmon trotting obediently after him. From her not-much-of-a-hiding place Lyra watched as the Master went to a large oak wardrobe in the corner of the room, took his gown from a hanger, and pulled it laboriously on. The Master had been a powerful man,

but he was well over seventy now, and his movements were stiff and slow. The Master's dæmon had the form of a raven, and as soon as his robe was on, she jumped down from the wardrobe and settled in her accustomed place on his right shoulder.

Lyra could feel Pantalaimon bristling with anxiety, though he made no sound. For herself, she was pleasantly excited. The visitor mentioned by the Master, Lord Asriel, was her uncle, a man whom she admired and feared greatly. He was said to be involved in high politics, in secret exploration, in distant warfare, and she never knew when he was going to appear. He was fierce: if he caught her in here she'd be severely punished, but she could put up with that.

What she saw next, however, changed things completely.

The Master took from his pocket a folded paper and laid it on the table. He took the stopper out of the mouth of a decanter containing a rich golden wine, unfolded the paper, and poured a thin stream of white powder into the decanter before crumpling the paper and throwing it into the fire. Then he took a pencil from his pocket and stirred the wine until the powder had dissolved, and replaced the stopper.

His dæmon gave a soft brief squawk. The Master replied in an undertone, and looked around with his hooded, clouded eyes before leaving through the door he'd come in by.

Lyra whispered, "Did you see that, Pan?"

"Of course I did! Now hurry out, before the Steward comes!"

But as he spoke, there came the sound of a bell ringing once from the far end of the Hall.

"That's the Steward's bell!" said Lyra. "I thought we had more time than that."

Pantalaimon fluttered swiftly to the Hall door, and swiftly back.

"The Steward's there already," he said. "And you can't get out of the other door..."

The other door, the one the Master had entered and left by, opened on to the busy corridor between the Library and the Scholars' Common Room. At this time of day it was thronged with men pulling on their gowns for dinner, or hurrying to leave papers or briefcases in the Common Room before moving into the Hall. Lyra had planned to leave the way she'd come, banking on another few minutes before the Steward's bell rang.

And if she hadn't seen the Master tipping that powder into the wine she might have risked the Steward's anger, or hoped to avoid being noticed in the busy corridor. But she was confused, and that made her hesitate.

Then she heard heavy footsteps on the dais. The Steward was coming to make sure the Retiring Room was ready for the Scholars' poppy and wine after dinner. Lyra darted to the oak wardrobe, opened it, and hid inside, pulling the door shut just as the Steward entered. She had no fear for Pantalaimon: the room was sombre-coloured, and he could always creep under a chair.

She heard the Steward's heavy wheezing, and through the crack where the door hadn't quite shut she saw him adjust the pipes in the rack by the smoking-mill and cast a glance over the decanters and glasses. Then he smoothed the hair over his ears with both palms and said something to his *dæmon*. He was a servant, so she was a dog; but a superior servant, so a superior dog. In fact, she had the form of a red setter. The *dæmon* seemed suspicious, and cast around as if she'd sensed an intruder, but didn't make for the wardrobe, to Lyra's intense relief. Lyra was afraid of the Steward, who had twice beaten her.

Lyra heard a tiny whisper; obviously Pantalaimon had squeezed in beside her.

"We're going to have to stay here now. Why don't you listen to me?"

She didn't reply until the Steward had left. It was his job to

supervise the waiting at the high table; she could hear the Scholars coming into the Hall, the murmur of voices, the shuffle of feet.

“It’s a good thing I didn’t,” she whispered back. “We wouldn’t have seen the Master put poison in the wine otherwise. Pan, that was the Tokay he asked the Butler about! They’re going to kill Lord Asriel!”

“You don’t know it’s poison.”

“Oh, of course it is. Don’t you remember, he made the Butler leave the room before he did it? If it was innocent it wouldn’t have mattered the Butler seeing. And I *know* there’s something going on – something political. The servants have been talking about it for days. Pan, we could prevent a murder!”

“I’ve never heard such nonsense,” he said shortly. “How do you think you’re going to keep still for four hours in this poky wardrobe? Let me go and look in the corridor. I’ll tell you when it’s clear.”

He fluttered from her shoulder, and she saw his little shadow appear in the crack of light.

“It’s no good, Pan, I’m staying,” she said. “There’s another robe or something here. I’ll put that on the floor and make myself comfortable. I’ve just *got* to see what they do.”

She had been crouching. She carefully stood up, feeling around for the clothes-hangers in order not to make a noise, and found that the wardrobe was bigger than she’d thought. There were several academic robes and hoods, some with fur around them, most faced with silk.

“I wonder if these are all the Master’s?” she whispered. “When he gets honorary degrees from other places, perhaps they give him fancy robes and he keeps them here for dressing up... Pan, do you really think it’s not poison in that wine?”

“No,” he said. “I think it is, like you do. And I think it’s none

of our business. And I think it would be the silliest thing you've ever done in a lifetime of silly things to interfere. It's nothing to do with us."

"Don't be stupid," Lyra said. "I can't sit in here and watch them give him poison!"

"Come somewhere else, then."

"You're a coward, Pan."

"Certainly I am. May I ask what you intend to do? Are you going to leap out and snatch the glass from his trembling fingers? What did you have in mind?"

"I didn't have anything in mind, and well you know it," she snapped quietly. "But now I've seen what the Master did, I haven't got any choice. You're supposed to know about conscience, aren't you? How can I just go and sit in the Library or somewhere and twiddle my thumbs, knowing what's going to happen? I don't intend to do *that*, I promise you."

"This is what you wanted all the time," he said after a moment. "You wanted to hide in here and watch. Why didn't I realize that before?"

"All right, I do," she said. "Everyone knows they get up to something secret. They have a ritual or something. And I just wanted to know what it was."

"It's none of our business! If they want to enjoy their little secrets you should just feel superior and let them get on with it. Hiding and spying is for silly children."

"Exactly what I knew you'd say. Now stop nagging."

The two of them sat in silence for a while, Lyra uncomfortable on the hard floor of the wardrobe and Pantalaimon self-righteously twitching his temporary antennae on one of the robes. Lyra felt a mixture of thoughts contending in her head, and she would have liked nothing better than to share them with her dæmon, but she was proud too. Perhaps she should try to

clear them up without his help.

Her main thought was anxiety, and it wasn't for herself. She'd been in trouble often enough to be used to it. This time she was anxious about Lord Asriel, and about what this all meant. It wasn't often that he visited the College, and the fact that this was a time of high political tension meant that he hadn't come simply to eat and drink and smoke with a few old friends. She knew that both Lord Asriel and the Master were members of the Cabinet Council, the Prime Minister's special advisory body, so it might have been something to do with that; but meetings of the Cabinet Council were held in the Palace, not in the Retiring Room of Jordan College.

Then there was the rumour that had been keeping the College servants whispering for days. It was said that the Tartars had invaded Muscovy, and were surging north to St Petersburg, from where they would be able to dominate the Baltic Sea and eventually overcome the entire west of Europe. And Lord Asriel had been in the far North: when she'd seen him last, he was preparing an expedition to Lapland...

"Pan," she whispered.

"Yes?"

"Do *you* think there'll be a war?"

"Not yet. Lord Asriel wouldn't be dining here if it was going to break out in the next week or so."

"That's what I thought. But later?"

"Sssh! Someone's coming."

She sat up and put her eye to the crack of the door. It was the Butler, coming to trim the lamp as the Master had ordered him to. The Common Room and the Library were lit by anbaric light, but the Scholars preferred the older, softer naphtha lamps in the Retiring Room. They wouldn't change that in the Master's lifetime.

The Butler trimmed the wick, and put another log on the fire as well, and then listened carefully at the Hall door before helping himself to a handful of leaf from the smoking-mill.

He had hardly replaced the lid when the handle of the other door turned, making him jump nervously. Lyra tried not to laugh. The Butler hastily stuffed the leaf into his pocket and turned to face the incomer.

“Lord Asriel!” he said, and a shiver of cold surprise ran down Lyra’s back. She couldn’t see him from where she was, and she tried to smother the urge to move and look.

“Good evening, Wren,” said Lord Asriel. Lyra always heard that harsh voice with a mixture of pleasure and apprehension. “I arrived too late to dine. I’ll wait in here.”

The Butler looked uncomfortable. Guests entered the Retiring Room at the Master’s invitation only, and Lord Asriel knew that; but the Butler also saw Lord Asriel looking pointedly at the bulge in his pocket, and decided not to protest.

“Shall I let the Master know you’ve arrived, my lord?”

“No harm in that. You might bring me some coffee.”

“Very good, my lord.”

The Butler bowed and hastened out, his *dæmon* trotting submissively at his heels. Lyra’s uncle moved across to the fire and stretched his arms high above his head, yawning like a lion. He was wearing travelling clothes. Lyra was reminded, as she always was when she saw him again, of how much he frightened her. There was no question now of creeping out unnoticed: she’d have to sit tight and hope.

Lord Asriel’s *dæmon*, a snow leopard, stood behind him.

“Are you going to show the projections in here?” she said quietly.

“Yes. It’ll create less fuss than moving to the Lecture Theatre. They’ll want to see the specimens, too; I’ll send for the Porter in

a minute. This is a bad time, Stelmaria.”

“You should rest.”

He stretched out in one of the armchairs, so that Lyra could no longer see his face.

“Yes, yes. I should also change my clothes. There’s probably some ancient etiquette that allows them to fine me a dozen bottles for coming in here dressed improperly. I should sleep for three days. The fact remains that —”

There was a knock, and the Butler came in with a silver tray bearing a coffee-pot and a cup.

“Thank you, Wren,” said Lord Asriel. “Is that the Tokay I can see on the table?”

“The Master ordered it decanted especially for you, my lord,” said the Butler. “There are only three dozen bottles left of the ’98.”

“All good things pass away. Leave the tray here beside me. Oh, ask the Porter to send up the two cases I left in the Lodge, would you?”

“Here, my lord?”

“Yes, here, man. And I shall need a screen and a projecting lantern, also here, also now.”

The Butler could hardly prevent himself from opening his mouth in surprise, but managed to suppress the question, or the protest.

“Wren, you’re forgetting your place,” said Lord Asriel. “Don’t question me; just do as I tell you.”

“Very good, my lord,” said the Butler. “If I may suggest it, I should perhaps let Mr Cawson know what you’re planning, my lord, or else he’ll be somewhat taken aback, if you see what I mean.”

“Yes. Tell him, then.”

Mr Cawson was the Steward. There was an old and well-

established rivalry between him and the Butler. The Steward was the superior, but the Butler had more opportunities to ingratiate himself with the Scholars, and made full use of them. He would be delighted to have this chance of showing the Steward that he knew more about what was going on in the Retiring Room.

He bowed and left. Lyra watched as her uncle poured a cup of coffee, drained it at once, and poured another before sipping more slowly. She was agog: cases of specimens? A projecting lantern? What did he have to show the Scholars that was so urgent and important?

Then Lord Asriel stood up and turned away from the fire. She saw him fully, and marvelled at the contrast he made with the plump Butler, the stooped and languid Scholars. Lord Asriel was a tall man with powerful shoulders, a fierce dark face, and eyes that seemed to flash and glitter with savage laughter. It was a face to be dominated by, or to fight: never a face to patronize or pity. All his movements were large and perfectly balanced, like those of a wild animal, and when he appeared in a room like this, he seemed a wild animal held in a cage too small for it.

At the moment his expression was distant and preoccupied. His dæmon came close and leant her head on his waist, and he looked down at her unfathomably before turning away and walking to the table. Lyra suddenly felt her stomach lurch, for Lord Asriel had taken the stopper from the decanter of Tokay, and was pouring a glass.

“No!”

The quiet cry came before she could hold it back. Lord Asriel heard and turned at once.

“Who’s there?”

She couldn’t help herself. She tumbled out of the wardrobe and scrambled up to snatch the glass from his hand. The wine flew out, splashing on the edge of the table and the carpet, and

then the glass fell and smashed. He seized her wrist and twisted hard.

“Lyra! What the hell are you doing?”

“Let go of me and I’ll tell you!”

“I’ll break your arm first. How dare you come in here?”

“I’ve just saved your life!”

They were still for a moment, the girl twisted in pain but grimacing to prevent herself from crying out louder, the man bent over her frowning like thunder.

“What did you say?” he said more quietly.

“That wine is poisoned,” she muttered between clenched teeth. “I saw the Master put some powder in it.”

He let go. She sank to the floor, and Pantalaimon fluttered anxiously to her shoulder. Her uncle looked down with a restrained fury, and she didn’t dare meet his eyes.

“I came in just to see what the room was like,” she said. “I know I shouldn’t have. But I was going to go out before anyone came in, except that I heard the Master coming and got trapped. The wardrobe was the only place to hide. And I saw him put the powder in the wine. If I hadn’t —”

There was a knock on the door.

“That’ll be the Porter,” said Lord Asriel. “Back in the wardrobe. If I hear the slightest noise I’ll make you wish you were dead.”

She darted back there at once, and no sooner had she pulled the door shut than Lord Asriel called, “Come in.”

As he’d said, it was the Porter.

“In here, my lord?”

Lyra saw the old man standing doubtfully in the doorway, and behind him, the corner of a large wooden box.

“That’s right, Shuter,” said Lord Asriel. “Bring them both in and put them down by the table.”

Lyra relaxed a little, and allowed herself to feel the pain in her shoulder and wrist. It might have been enough to make her cry, if she was the sort of girl who cried. Instead she gritted her teeth and moved the arm gently until it felt looser.

Then came a crash of glass and the glug of spilled liquid.

“Damn you, Shuter, you careless old fool! Look what you’ve done!”

Lyra could see, just. Her uncle had managed to knock the decanter of Tokay off the table, and made it look as if the Porter had done it. The old man put the box down carefully and began to apologize.

“I’m truly sorry, my lord – I must have been closer than I thought –”

“Get something to clear this mess up. Go on, before it soaks into the carpet!”

The Porter and his young assistant hurried out. Lord Asriel moved closer to the wardrobe and spoke in an undertone.

“Since you’re in there, you can make yourself useful. Watch the Master closely when he comes in. If you tell me something interesting about him, I’ll keep you from getting further into the trouble you’re already in. Understand?”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“Make a noise in there and I won’t help you. You’re on your own.”

He moved away and stood with his back to the fire again as the Porter came back with a brush and dustpan for the glass and a bowl and cloth.

“I can only say once again, my lord, I do most earnestly beg your pardon; I don’t know what –”

“Just clear up the mess.”

As the Porter began to mop the wine from the carpet, the Butler knocked and came in with Lord Asriel’s manservant, a

man called Thorold. They were carrying between them a heavy case of polished wood with brass handles. They saw what the Porter was doing and stopped dead.

“Yes, it was the Tokay,” said Lord Asriel. “Too bad. Is that the lantern? Set it up by the wardrobe, Thorold, if you would. I’ll have the screen up at the other end.”

Lyra realized that she would be able to see the screen and whatever was on it through the crack in the door, and wondered whether her uncle had arranged it like that for the purpose. Under the noise the manservant made unrolling the stiff linen and setting it up on its frame, she whispered:

“See? It was worth coming, wasn’t it?”

“It might be,” Pantalaimon said austerely, in his tiny moth-voice. “And it might not.”

Lord Asriel stood by the fire sipping the last of the coffee and watching darkly as Thorold opened the case of the projecting lantern and uncapped the lens before checking the oil-tank.

“There’s plenty of oil, my lord,” he said. “Shall I send for a technician to operate it?”

“No. I’ll do it myself. Thank you, Thorold. Have they finished dinner yet, Wren?”

“Very nearly, I think, my lord,” replied the Butler. “If I understand Mr Cawson aright, the Master and his guests won’t be disposed to linger once they know you’re here. Shall I take the coffee-tray?”

“Take it and go.”

“Very good, my lord.”

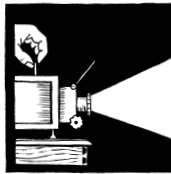
With a slight bow, the Butler took the tray and left, and Thorold went with him. As soon as the door closed, Lord Asriel looked across the room directly at the wardrobe, and Lyra felt the force of his glance almost as if it had physical form, as if it were an arrow or a spear. Then he looked away and spoke softly to his dæmon.

She came to sit calmly at his side, alert and elegant and dangerous, her green eyes surveying the room before turning, like his black ones, to the door from the Hall as the handle turned. Lyra couldn't see the door, but she heard an intake of breath as the first man came in.

"Master," said Lord Asriel. "Yes, I'm back. Do bring in your guests; I've got something very interesting to show you."

2

The Idea of North



“Lord Asriel,” said the Master heavily, and came forward to shake his hand. From her hiding-place Lyra watched the Master’s eyes, and indeed, they flicked towards the table for a second, where the Tokay had been.

“Master,” said Lord Asriel. “I came too late to disturb your dinner, so I made myself at home in here. Hello, Sub-Rector. Glad to see you looking so well. Excuse my rough appearance; I’ve only just landed. Yes, Master, the Tokay’s gone. I think you’re standing in it. The Porter knocked it off the table, but it was my fault. Hello, Chaplain. I read your latest paper with great interest...”

He moved away with the Chaplain, leaving Lyra with a clear view of the Master’s face. It was impassive, but the dæmon on his shoulder was shuffling her feathers and moving restlessly from foot to foot. Lord Asriel was already dominating the room, and although he was careful to be courteous to the Master in the Master’s own territory, it was clear where the power lay.

The Scholars greeted the visitor and moved into the room, some sitting around the table, some in the armchairs, and soon a buzz of conversation filled the air. Lyra could see that they were powerfully intrigued by the wooden case, the screen and the lantern. She knew the Scholars well: the Librarian, the Sub-Rector, the Enquirer and

the rest; they were men who had been around her all her life, taught her, chastised her, consoled her, given her little presents, chased her away from the fruit trees in the Garden; they were all she had for a family. They might even have felt like a family if she knew what a family was, though if she did, she'd have been more likely to feel that about the College servants. The Scholars had more important things to do than attend to the affections of a half-wild, half-civilized girl, left among them by chance.

The Master lit the spirit-lamp under the little silver chafing-dish and heated some butter before cutting half a dozen poppy-heads open and tossing them in. Poppy was always served after a Feast: it clarified the mind and stimulated the tongue, and made for rich conversation. It was traditional for the Master to cook it himself.

Under the sizzle of the frying butter and the hum of talk, Lyra shifted around to find a more comfortable position for herself. With enormous care she took one of the robes – a full-length fur – off its hanger and laid it on the floor of the wardrobe.

“You should have used a scratchy old one,” whispered Pantalaimon. “If you get too comfortable you’ll go to sleep.”

“If I do, it’s your job to wake me up,” she replied.

She sat and listened to the talk. Mighty dull talk it was, too; almost all of it politics, and London politics at that, nothing exciting about Tartars. The smells of frying poppy and smoke-leaf drifted pleasantly in through the wardrobe door, and more than once Lyra found herself nodding. But finally she heard someone rap the table. The voices fell silent, and then the Master spoke.

“Gentlemen,” he said. “I feel sure I speak for all of us when I bid Lord Asriel welcome. His visits are rare but always immensely valuable, and I understand he has something of particular interest to show us tonight. This is a time of high political tension, as we are all aware; Lord Asriel’s presence is

required early tomorrow morning in White Hall, and a train is waiting with steam up ready to carry him to London as soon as we have finished our conversation here; so we must use our time wisely. When he has finished speaking to us, I imagine there will be some questions. Please keep them brief and to the point. Lord Asriel, would you like to begin?”

“Thank you, Master,” said Lord Asriel. “To start with, I have a few slides to show you. Sub-Rector, you can see best from here, I think. Perhaps the Master would like to take the chair near the wardrobe?”

The old Sub-Rector was nearly blind, so it was courteous to make room for him nearer the screen, and his moving forward meant that the Master would be sitting next to the Librarian, only a matter of a yard or so from where Lyra was crouched in the wardrobe. As the Master settled in the armchair, Lyra heard him murmur:

“The devil! He *knew* about the wine, I’m sure of it.”

The Librarian murmured back, “He’s going to ask for funds. If he forces a vote –”

“If he does that, we must just argue against, with all the eloquence we have.”

The lantern began to hiss as Lord Asriel pumped it hard. Lyra moved slightly so that she could see the screen, where a brilliant white circle had begun to glow. Lord Asriel called, “Could someone turn the lamp down?”

One of the Scholars got up to do that, and the room darkened.

Lord Asriel began:

“As some of you know, I set out for the North twelve months ago on a diplomatic mission to the King of Lapland. At least, that’s what I pretended to be doing. In fact my real aim was to go further north still, right on to the ice, to try and discover what had happened to the Grumman expedition. One of Grumman’s

last messages to the Academy in Berlin spoke of a certain natural phenomenon only seen in the lands of the North. I was determined to investigate that as well as find out what I could about Grumman. But the first picture I'm going to show you isn't directly about either of those things."

And he put the first slide into the frame and slid it behind the lens. A circular photogram in sharp black and white appeared on the screen. It had been taken at night under a full moon, and it showed a wooden hut in the middle distance, its walls dark against the snow that surrounded it and lay thickly on the roof. Beside the hut stood an array of philosophical instruments, which looked to Lyra's eye like something from the Anbaric Park on the road to Yarnton: aerials, wires, porcelain insulators, all glittering in the moonlight and thickly covered in frost. A man in furs, his face hardly visible in the deep hood of his garment, stood in the foreground, with his hand raised as if in greeting. To one side of him stood a smaller figure. The moonlight bathed everything in the same pallid gleam.

"That photogram was taken with a standard silver nitrate emulsion," Lord Asriel said. "I'd like you to look at another one, taken from the same spot only a minute later, with a new specially prepared emulsion."

He lifted out the first slide and dropped another into the frame. This was much darker; it was as if the moonlight had been filtered out. The horizon was still visible, with the dark shape of the hut and its light snow-covered roof standing out, but the complexity of the instruments was hidden in darkness. But the man had altogether changed: he was bathed in light, and a fountain of glowing particles seemed to be streaming from his upraised hand.

"That light," said the Chaplain, "is it going up or coming down?"

“It’s coming down,” said Lord Asriel, “but it isn’t light. It’s Dust.”

Something in the way he said it made Lyra imagine *Dust* with a capital letter, as if this wasn’t ordinary dust. The reaction of the Scholars confirmed her feeling, because Lord Asriel’s words caused a sudden collective silence, followed by gasps of incredulity.

“But how –”

“Surely –”

“It can’t –”

“Gentlemen!” came the voice of the Chaplain. “Let Lord Asriel explain.”

“It’s Dust,” Lord Asriel repeated. “It registered as light on the plate because particles of Dust affect this emulsion as photons affect silver nitrate emulsion. It was partly to test it that my expedition went North in the first place. As you see, the figure of the man is perfectly visible. Now I’d like you to look at the shape to his left.”

He indicated the blurred shape of the smaller figure.

“I thought that was the man’s dæmon,” said the Enquirer.

“No. His dæmon was at the time coiled around his neck in the form of a snake. That shape you can dimly see is a child.”

“A severed child – ?” said someone, and the way he stopped showed that he knew this was something that shouldn’t have been voiced.

There was an intense silence.

Then Lord Asriel said calmly, “An entire child. Which, given the nature of Dust, is precisely the point, is it not?”

No one spoke for several seconds. Then came the voice of the Chaplain.

“Ah,” he said, like a thirsty man who, having just drunk deeply, puts down the glass to let out the breath he has held while

drinking. “And the streams of Dust...”

“– Come from the sky, and bathe him in what looks like light. You may examine this picture as closely as you wish: I’ll leave it behind when I go. I’m showing it to you now to demonstrate the effect of this new emulsion. Now I’d like to show you another picture.”

He changed the slide. The next picture was also taken at night, but this time without moonlight. It showed a small group of tents in the foreground, dimly outlined against the low horizon, and beside them an untidy heap of wooden boxes and a sledge. But the main interest of the picture lay in the sky. Streams and veils of light hung like curtains, looped and festooned on invisible hooks hundreds of miles high or blowing out sideways in the stream of some unimaginable wind.

“What is that?” said the voice of the Sub-Rector.

“It’s a picture of the Aurora.”

“It’s a very fine photogram,” said the Palmerian Professor. “One of the best I’ve seen.”

“Forgive my ignorance,” said the shaky voice of the old Precentor, “but if I ever knew what the Aurora was, I have forgotten. Is it what they call the Northern Lights?”

“Yes. It has many names. It’s composed of storms of charged particles and solar rays of intense and extraordinary strength – invisible in themselves, but causing this luminous radiation when they interact with the atmosphere. If there’d been time I would have had this slide tinted to show you the colours; pale green and rose, for the most part, with a tinge of crimson along the lower edge of that curtain-like formation. This is taken with ordinary emulsion. Now I’d like you to look at a picture taken with the special emulsion.”

He took out the slide. Lyra heard the Master say quietly, “If

he forces a vote, we could try to invoke the residence clause. He hasn't been resident in the College for thirty weeks out of the last fifty-two."

"He's already got the Chaplain on his side..." the Librarian murmured in reply.

Lord Asriel put a new slide in the lantern frame. It showed the same scene. As with the previous pair of pictures, many of the features visible by ordinary light were much dimmer in this one, and so were the curtains of radiance in the sky.

But in the middle of the Aurora, high above the bleak landscape, Lyra could see something solid. She pressed her face to the crack to see more clearly, and she could see Scholars near the screen leaning forward, too. As she gazed, her wonder grew, because there in the sky was the unmistakable outline of a city: towers, domes, walls ... buildings and streets, suspended in the air! She nearly gasped with wonder.

The Cassington Scholar said, "That looks like ... a city."

"Exactly so," said Lord Asriel.

"A city in another world, no doubt?" said the Dean, with contempt in his voice.

Lord Asriel ignored him. There was a stir of excitement among some of the Scholars, as if, having written treatises on the existence of the unicorn without ever having seen one, they'd been presented with a living example newly captured.

"Is this the Barnard-Stokes business?" said the Palmerian Professor. "It is, isn't it?"

"That's what I want to find out," said Lord Asriel.

He stood to one side of the illuminated screen. Lyra could see his dark eyes searching among the Scholars as they peered up at the slide of the Aurora, and the green glow of his dæmon's eyes beside him. All the venerable heads were craning forward, their spectacles glinting; only the Master and the Librarian leant back

in their chairs, with their heads close together.

The Chaplain was saying, “You said you were searching for news of the Grumman expedition, Lord Asriel. Was Dr Grumman investigating this phenomenon too?”

“I believe he was, and I believe he had a good deal of information about it. But he won’t be able to tell us what it was, because he’s dead.”

“No!” said the Chaplain.

“I’m afraid so, and I have the proof here.”

A ripple of excited apprehension ran round the Retiring Room as, under Lord Asriel’s direction, two or three of the younger Scholars carried the wooden box to the front of the room. Lord Asriel took out the last slide but left the lantern on, and in the dramatic glare of the circle of light he bent to lever open the box. Lyra heard the screech of nails coming out of damp wood. The Master stood up to look, blocking Lyra’s view. Her uncle spoke again:

“If you remember, Grumman’s expedition vanished eighteen months ago. The German Academy sent him up there to go as far north as the magnetic pole and make various celestial observations. It was in the course of that journey that he observed the curious phenomenon we’ve already seen. Shortly after that, he vanished. It’s been assumed that he had an accident and that his body’s been lying in a crevasse all this time. In fact there was no accident.”

“What have you got there?” said the Dean. “Is that a vacuum container?”

Lord Asriel didn’t answer at first. Lyra heard the snap of metal clips and a hiss as air rushed into a vessel, and then there was a silence. But the silence didn’t last long. After a moment or two Lyra heard a confused babble break out: cries of horror, loud protests, voices raised in anger and fear.

“But what –”

“– hardly human –”

“– it’s been –”

“– what’s *happened* to it?”

The Master’s voice cut through them all.

“Lord Asriel, what in God’s name have you got there?”

“This is the head of Stanislaus Grumman,” said Lord Asriel’s voice.

Over the jumble of voices Lyra heard someone stumble to the door and out, making incoherent sounds of distress. She wished she could see what they were seeing.

Lord Asriel said, “I found his body preserved in the ice off Svalbard. The head was treated in this way by his killers. You’ll notice the characteristic scalping pattern. I think you might be familiar with it, Sub-Rector.”

The old man’s voice was steady as he said, “I have seen the Tartars do this. It’s a technique you find among the aboriginals of Siberia and the Tungusk. From there, of course, it spread into the lands of the Skraelings, though I understand that it is now banned in New Denmark. May I examine it more closely, Lord Asriel?”

After a short silence he spoke again.

“My eyes are not very clear, and the ice is dirty, but it seems to me that there is a hole in the top of the skull. Am I right?”

“You are.”

“Trepanning?”

“Exactly.”

That caused a murmur of excitement. The Master moved out of the way and Lyra could see again. The old Sub-Rector, in the circle of light thrown by the lantern, was holding a heavy block of ice up close to his eyes, and Lyra could see the object inside it: a bloody lump barely recognizable as a human head. Pantalaimon

fluttered around Lyra, his distress affecting her.

“Hush,” she whispered. “Listen.”

“Dr Grumman was once a Scholar of this College,” said the Dean hotly.

“To fall into the hands of the Tartars –”

“But that far north?”

“They must have penetrated further than anyone imagined!”

“Did I hear you say you found it near Svalbard?” said the Dean.

“That’s right.”

“Are we to understand that the *panserbjørne* had anything to do with this?”

Lyra didn’t recognize that word, but clearly the Scholars did.

“Impossible,” said the Cassington Scholar firmly. “They’d never behave in that manner.”

“Then you don’t know Iofur Raknison,” said the Palmerian Professor, who had made several expeditions himself to the Arctic regions. “It wouldn’t surprise me at all to learn that he had taken to scalping people in the Tartar fashion.”

Lyra looked again at her uncle, who was watching the Scholars with a glitter of sardonic amusement, and saying nothing.

“Who is Iofur Raknison?” said someone.

“The king of Svalbard,” said the Palmerian Professor. “Yes, that’s right, one of the *panserbjørne*. He’s a usurper, of sorts; tricked his way on to the throne, or so I understand; but a powerful figure, by no means a fool, in spite of his ludicrous affectations – having a palace built of imported marble – setting up what he calls a university –”

“For whom? For the *bears*?” said someone else, and everyone laughed.

But the Palmerian Professor went on, “For all that, I tell you

that Iofur Raknison would be capable of doing this to Grumman. At the same time, he could be flattered into behaving quite differently, if the need arose.”

“And you know how, do you, Trelawney?” said the Dean sneeringly.

“Indeed I do. Do you know what he wants above all else? Even more than an honorary degree? He wants a dæmon! Find a way to give him a dæmon, and he’d do anything for you.”

The Scholars laughed heartily.

Lyra was following this with puzzlement: what the Palmerian Professor said made no sense at all. Besides, she was impatient to hear more about scalping and the Northern Lights and that mysterious Dust. But she was disappointed, for Lord Asriel had finished showing his relics and pictures, and the talk soon turned into a college wrangle about whether or not they should give him some money to fit out another expedition. Back and forth the arguments ranged, and Lyra felt her eyes closing. Soon she was fast asleep, with Pantalaimon curled around her neck in his favourite sleeping-form as an ermine.

She woke up with a start when someone shook her shoulder.

“Quiet,” said her uncle. The wardrobe door was open, and he was crouched there against the light. “They’ve all gone, but there are still some servants around. Go to your bedroom now, and take care that you say nothing about this.”

“Did they vote to give you the money?” she said sleepily.

“Yes.”

“What’s Dust?” she said, struggling to stand up after having been cramped for so long.

“Nothing to do with you.”

“It *is* to do with me,” she said. “If you wanted me to be a spy in the wardrobe you ought to tell me what I’m spying about. Can

I see the man's head?"

Pantalaimon's white ermine-fur bristled: she felt it tickling her neck. Lord Asriel laughed shortly.

"Don't be disgusting," he said, and began to pack his slides and specimen-box. "Did you watch the Master?"

"Yes, and he looked for the wine before he did anything else."

"Good. But I've scotched him for now. Do as you're told and go to bed."

"But where are *you* going?"

"Back to the North. I'm leaving in ten minutes."

"Can I come?"

He stopped what he was doing, and looked at her as if for the first time. His *dæmon* turned her great green leopard-eyes on her too, and under the concentrated gaze of both of them, Lyra blushed. But she gazed back fiercely.

"Your place is here," said her uncle finally.

"But why? Why is my place here? Why can't I come to the North with you? I want to see the Northern Lights and bears and icebergs and everything. I want to know about Dust. And that city in the air. Is it another world?"

"You're not coming, child. Put it out of your head; the times are too dangerous. Do as you're told and go to bed, and if you're a good girl, I'll bring you back a walrus tusk with some Eskimo carving on it. Don't argue any more or I shall be angry."

And his *dæmon* growled with a deep savage rumble that made Lyra suddenly aware of what it would be like to have teeth meeting in her throat.

Lyra compressed her lips and frowned hard at her uncle. He was pumping the air from the vacuum flask, and took no notice; it was as if he'd already forgotten her. Without a word, but with lips tight and narrowed eyes, the girl and her *dæmon* left and went to bed.