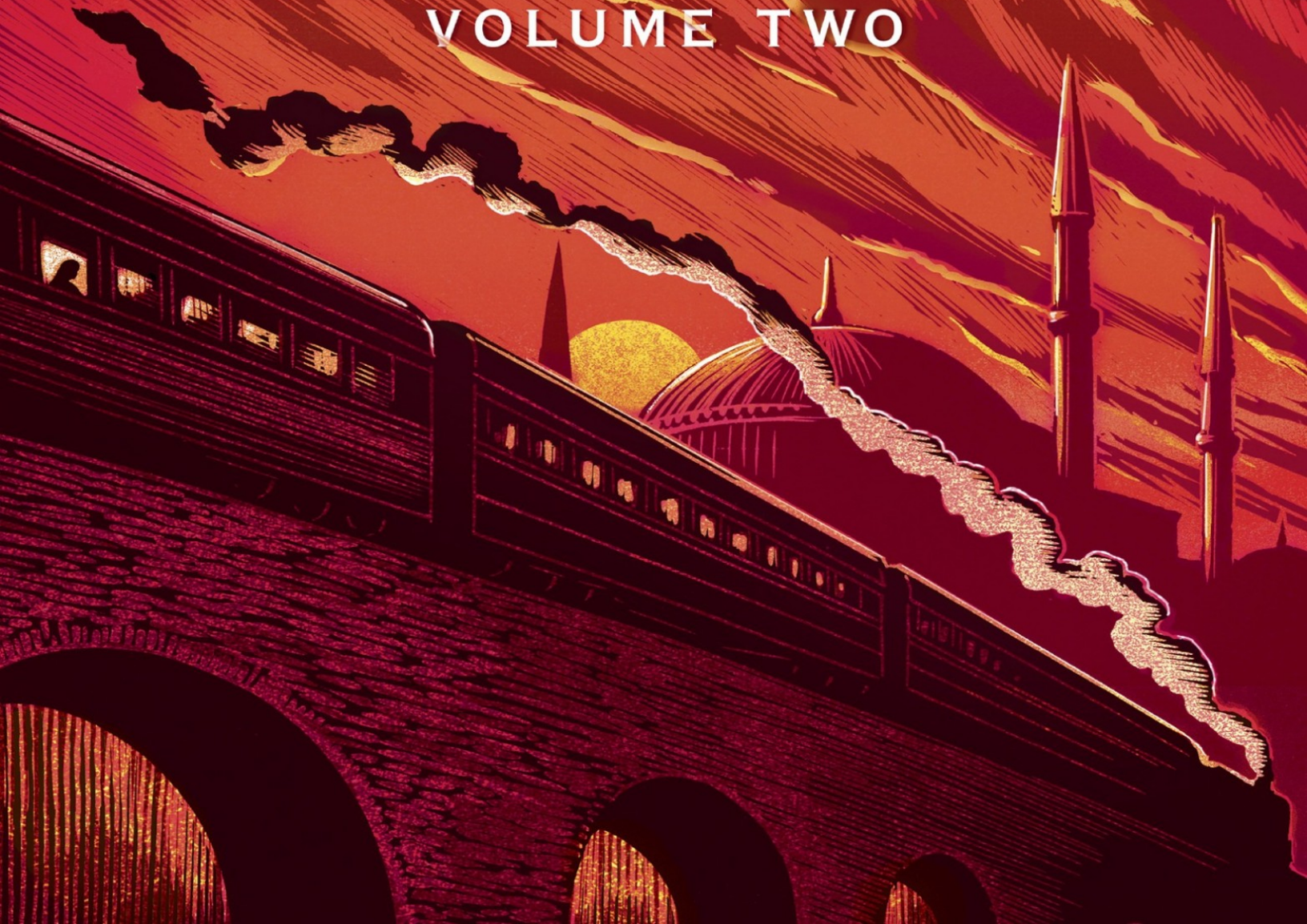


BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF HIS DARK MATERIALS

PHILIP PULLMAN

THE SECRET COMMONWEALTH

THE BOOK OF DUST
VOLUME TWO



ALSO BY PHILIP PULLMAN

THE BOOK OF DUST

La Belle Sauvage



HIS DARK MATERIALS

The Golden Compass

The Subtle Knife

The Amber Spyglass

Lyra's Oxford

Once Upon a Time in the North

The Collectors (an e-story)

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The White Mercedes

Count Karlstein

I Was a Rat!

The Scarecrow and His Servant

Spring-Heeled Jack

Two Crafty Criminals!

THE SECRET COMMONWEALTH

THE BOOK OF DUST
VOLUME TWO

PHILIP PULLMAN

ALFRED A. KNOPF  NEW YORK

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TO NICK MESSENGER,
fine poet and indomitable friend

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Secret Commonwealth is the second part of The Book of Dust. The central character, Lyra Silvertongue, once known as Lyra Belacqua, was also the protagonist of a previous trilogy, His Dark Materials: in fact, her name was both the first word and the last in that work. In that story, she was about eleven or twelve years old.

In the first part of The Book of Dust, *La Belle Sauvage*, Lyra was a baby. Although she was central to the story, most of the action of that book concerned a boy called Malcolm Polstead, himself about eleven years old.

In this book, we skip ahead twenty years or so. The events of His Dark Materials are ten years in the past; both Malcolm and Lyra are adults. The events of *La Belle Sauvage* are even further back in time.

But events have consequences, and sometimes the effects of what we once did take a long time to become fully apparent. At the same time, the world moves on; power and influence shift, or increase, or diminish. And the problems and concerns of adult people are not necessarily the same as the ones they had when young. Lyra and Malcolm, as I say, are not children anymore.

Philip Pullman

Every thing possible to be believ'd is an image of truth.

—William Blake

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Epigraph

Acknowledgments



ONE

MOONLIGHT AND BLOODSHED

Pantalaimon, the dæmon of Lyra Belacqua, now called Lyra Silvertongue, lay along the windowsill of Lyra's little study-bedroom in St. Sophia's College in a state as far from thought as he could get. He was aware of the cold draft from the ill-fitting sash window beside him, and of the warm naphtha light on the desk below the window, and of the scratching of Lyra's pen, and of the darkness outside. It was the cold and the dark he most wanted just then. As he lay there, turning over to feel the cold now on his back, now on his front, the desire to go outside became even stronger than his reluctance to speak to Lyra.

"Open the window," he said finally. "I want to go out."

Lyra's pen stopped moving; she pushed her chair back and stood up. Pantalaimon could see her reflection in the glass, suspended over the Oxford night. He could even make out her expression of mutinous unhappiness.

"I know what you're going to say," he said. "Of course I'll be careful. I'm not stupid."

"In some ways you are," she said.

She reached over him and slid the window up, propping it open with the nearest book.

“Don’t—” he began.

“Don’t shut the window, yes, Pan, just sit there freezing till Pan decides to come home. I’m not stupid at all. Go on, bugger off.”

He flowed out and into the ivy covering the wall of the college. Only the faintest rustle came to Lyra’s ears, and then only for a moment. Pan didn’t like the way they were speaking to each other, or rather not speaking; in fact, these words were the first they’d exchanged all day. But he didn’t know what to do about it, and neither did she.

Halfway down the wall he caught a mouse in his needle-sharp teeth and wondered about eating it, but gave it a surprise and let it go. He crouched on the thick ivy branch, relishing all the smells, all the wayward gusts of air, all the wide-open night around him.

But he was going to be careful. He had to be careful about two things. One was the patch of cream-white fur that covered his throat, which stood out with unfortunate clarity against the rest of his red-brown pine marten fur. But it wasn’t hard to keep his head down, or to run fast. The other reason for being careful was much more serious. No one who saw him would think for a moment that he was a pine marten; he looked like a pine marten in every respect, but he was a *dæmon*. It was very hard to say where the difference lay, but any human being in Lyra’s world would have known it at once, as surely as they knew the smell of coffee or the color red.

And a person apart from their *dæmon*, or a *dæmon* alone with their person nowhere in sight, was something uncanny, eldritch, impossible. No ordinary human beings could separate in that way, though reputedly witches could. The power that Lyra and Pan had was peculiar to them, and had been dearly bought eight years before in the world of the dead. Since coming home to Oxford after that strange adventure, they had told no one about it, and exercised the most scrupulous care to keep it a secret; but sometimes, and more often recently, they simply had to get away from each other.

So now Pan kept to the shadows, and as he moved through the shrubs and the long grass that bordered the great expanse of the neatly mown University Parks, feeling the night with all his senses, he made no sound

and kept his head low. It had rained earlier that evening, and the earth was soft and moist under his feet. When he came to a patch of mud, he crouched down and pressed his throat and chest into it, so as to conceal the treacherous patch of cream-white fur.

Leaving the Parks, he darted across the Banbury Road at a moment when there were no pedestrians on the pavement, and only one distant vehicle in sight. Then he slipped into the garden of one of the large houses on the other side, and then through hedges, over walls, under fences, across lawns, making for Jericho and the canal only a few streets away.

Once he reached the muddy towpath, he felt safer. There were bushes and long grass to hide in, and trees up which he could dart as quickly as a fire along a fuse. This semi-wild part of the city was the place he liked best. He had swum in every one of the many stretches of water that laced Oxford through and through—not only the canal but also the wide body of the Thames itself and its tributary the Cherwell, as well as the countless little streams diverted from the main flows to power a mill or feed an ornamental lake, some running underground and out of sight until they emerged beneath this college wall or behind that burial ground or brewery.

At the point where one of these streams ran next to the canal with only the towpath between them, Pan crossed over a little iron bridge and followed the stream down to the great open space of the allotment gardens, with the Oxpens cattle market to the north and the Royal Mail depot beside the railway station on the western side.

The moon was full, and a few stars were visible between the racing wisps of cloud. The light made it more dangerous for him, but Pan loved the cold silver clarity as he prowled through the allotments, slipping between the stalks of Brussels sprouts or cauliflowers, the leaves of onions or spinach, making no more noise than a shadow. He came to a tool shed, and leapt up to lie flat on the hard tar-paper roof and gaze across the wide-open meadow towards the mail depot.

That was the only place in the city that seemed awake. Pan and Lyra had come here more than once before, together, and watched as the trains came in from the north and south to stand steaming at the platform while the workers unloaded sacks of letters and parcels onto large wheeled baskets and rolled them into the great metal-sided shed, where the mail for London

and the continent would be sorted in time for the morning zeppelin. The airship was tethered fore and aft nearby, swinging and swaying in the wind as the mooring lines snapped and clanged against the mast. Lights glowed on the platform, on the mooring mast, above the doors of the Royal Mail building; railway trucks clattered in a siding, a metal door somewhere closed with a bang.

Pan saw a movement among the allotments to his right, and very slowly turned his head to look. A cat was creeping along a line of cabbages or broccoli, intent on a mouse; but before the cat could spring, a silent white shape bigger than Pan himself swooped down from the sky and seized the mouse, to fly up again out of reach of the cat's claws. The owl's wings beat in perfect silence as it made its way back to one of the trees behind Paradise Square. The cat sat down, seeming to think about the matter, and then resumed the hunt among the vegetables.

The moon was bright now, higher in the sky and almost clear of the cloud, and Pan could see every detail of the allotments and the cattle market from his vantage point on the shed. Greenhouses, scarecrows, galvanized-iron cattle pens, water butts, fences rotted and sagging or upright and neatly painted, pea sticks tied together like naked tepees: they all lay silent in the moonlight, like a stage set for a play of ghosts.

Pan whispered, "Lyra, what's happened to us?"

There was no answer.

The mail train had been unloaded, and now it blew a brief whistle before starting to move. It didn't come out on the rail line that crossed the river southwards just past the allotments, but moved slowly forward and then slowly back into a siding, with a great clanking of wagons. Clouds of steam rose from the engine, to be whipped away in shreds by the cold wind.

On the other side of the river, beyond the trees, another train was coming in. It wasn't a mail train; it didn't stop at the depot, but went three hundred yards further on and into the railway station itself. This was the slow local train from Reading, Pan guessed. He heard it pull up at the platform with a distant hiss of steam and muted screech of brakes.

Something else was moving.

From Pan's left, where an iron bridge crossed the river, a man was walking—or rather hurrying, with an air of furtive haste—along the riverbank where the reeds grew thickly.

At once Pan flowed down off the shed roof and ran silently towards him through onion beds and lines of cabbages. Dodging through fences and under a rusting steel water tank, he came to the edge of the allotment grounds and stood looking through a broken fence panel at the grassy meadow beyond.

The man was moving in the direction of the Royal Mail depot, going more and more carefully, until he stopped by a willow on the bank a hundred yards or so from the depot gate, almost opposite where Pan was crouching under the allotments fence. Even Pan's keen eyes could hardly make him out in the shadow; if he looked away for a moment, he'd lose the man altogether.

Then nothing. The man might have vanished entirely. A minute went past, then another. In the city behind Pan, distant bells began to strike, twice each: half past midnight.

Pan looked along the trees beside the river. A little way to the left of the willow there stood an old oak, bare and stark in its winter leaflessness. On the right—

On the right, a single figure was climbing over the gate of the Royal Mail depot. The newcomer jumped down, and then hurried along the riverbank towards the willow where the first man was waiting.

A cloud covered the moon for a few moments, and in the shadows Pan slipped under the fence and then bounded across the wet grass as fast as he could go, keeping low, mindful of that owl, mindful of the man in hiding, making for the oak. As soon as he reached it, he sprang up, extending his claws to catch at the bark, and propelled himself up onto a high branch, from which he could see the willow clearly just as the moon came out again.

The man from the mail depot was hurrying towards it. When he was nearly there, moving more slowly, peering into the shadows, the first man stepped out quietly and said a soft word. The second man replied in the same tone, and then they both retreated into the darkness. They were just

too far away for Pan to hear what they'd said, but there was a tone of complicity in it. They'd planned to meet here.

Their dæmons were both dogs: a sort of mastiff and a short-legged dog. The dogs wouldn't be able to climb, but they could sniff him out, and Pan pressed himself even closer to the broad bough he was lying on. He could hear a quiet whisper from the men, but again could make out none of the words.

Between the high chain-link fence of the mail depot and the river, a path led from the open meadow next to the allotments towards the railway station. It was the natural way to go to the station from the parish of St. Ebbe's and the narrow streets of houses that crowded along the river near the gasworks. Looking from the branch of the oak tree, Pan could see further along the path than the men down below, and saw someone coming from the direction of the station before they did: a man on his own, the collar of his coat turned up against the cold.

Then came a "Ssh" from the shadows under the willow. The men had seen the new arrival too.

* * *

Earlier that day, in an elegant seventeenth-century house near the Cathedral of St. Peter in Geneva, two men were talking. They were in a book-lined room on the second floor, whose windows looked out on a quiet street in the somber light of a winter afternoon. There was a long mahogany table set with blotters, pads of paper, pens and pencils, glasses, and carafes of water, but the men were sitting in armchairs on either side of a log fire.

The host was Marcel Delamare, the Secretary General of an organization known informally by the name of the building they occupied, the one in which this meeting was taking place. It was called *La Maison Juste*. Delamare was in his early forties, bespectacled, well groomed, his perfectly tailored suit matching the color of his dark gray hair. His dæmon was a snowy owl, who perched on the back of his armchair, her yellow eyes fixed on the dæmon in the other man's hands, a scarlet snake winding herself through and through his fingers. The visitor was called Pierre Binaud. He was in his sixties, austere in a clerical collar, and he was the Chief Justice of

the Consistorial Court, the main agency of the Magisterium for enforcing discipline and security.

“Well?” said Binaud.

“Another member of the scientific staff at the Lop Nor station has disappeared,” said Delamare.

“Why? What does your agent say about it?”

“The official line is that the missing man and his companion were lost among the watercourses, which change their position rapidly and without warning. It is a very difficult place, and anyone leaving the station must take a guide. But our agent tells me that there is a rumor that they entered the desert, which begins beyond the lake. There are local legends about gold—”

“Local legends be damned. These people were experimental theologians, botanists, men of science. They were after the roses, not gold. But what are you saying, that one of them disappeared? What about the other?”

“He did return to the station, but set off at once for Europe. His name is Hassall. I told you about him last week, but perhaps you were too busy to hear me. My agent believes that he’s carrying samples of the rose materials, and a number of papers.”

“Have we captured him yet?”

Delamare composed himself almost visibly. “If you remember, Pierre,” he said after a moment, “I would have had him detained in Venice. That idea was overruled by your people. Let him get to Brytain, and then follow him to discover his destination: that was the order. Well, he has now arrived there, and tonight he will be intercepted.”

“Let me know as soon as you have those materials. Now, this other matter: the young woman. What do you know about her?”

“The alethiometer—”

“No, no, no. Old-fashioned, vague, too full of speculation. Give me facts, Marcel.”

“We have a new reader, who—”

“Oh yes, I’ve heard of him. New method. Any better than the old one?”

“Times change, and understandings must change too.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means that we’ve discovered some things about the girl that were not clear before. It seems that she is under certain protections, legal and otherwise. I would like to begin by taking down the network of defense around her, unobtrusively, quietly, one might say invisibly. And when she is vulnerable, that will be the time to take action. Until then—”

“Cautious,” said Binaud, standing up. “Too cautious, Marcel. It’s a big fault. You need to be decisive. Take action. Find her, acquire her, and bring her here. But have it your own way; I won’t overrule you this time.”

Delamare rose to shake his visitor’s hand and see him out. When they were alone, his dæmon flew to his shoulder and they stood at the window to watch the Chief Justice bustle away, one attendant carrying his briefcase, another holding an umbrella against the snow that had just begun to fall.

“I do dislike being interrupted,” said Delamare.

“I don’t think he noticed,” said his dæmon.

“Oh, he’ll be aware of it one day.”

* * *

The man coming from the railway station was moving quickly: in less than a minute he was almost at the tree, and as soon as he got there, the other men struck. One stepped out and swung a heavy stick to strike him at his knees. He dropped at once, grunting with shock, and then the other man was on him, chopping down with a short club, striking his head, his shoulders, his arms.

No one uttered a word. The victim’s dæmon, a small hawk, rose into the air, crying and fluttering violently, and kept falling down as her man weakened under the blows.

But then Pan saw a flash of moonlight reflected on a knife blade, and the man from the mail depot cried out and fell, but the other attacker struck again and again, and the victim fell still. Pan heard every blow.

The man was dead. The second man stood up and looked at his companion.

“What’d he do?” he said quietly.

“Cut my bloody hamstrings. Bastard. Look, I’m bleeding like a pig.”

The man’s dæmon, the mastiff-cross, was whining and writhing on the ground beside him.

“Can you get up?” The killer’s voice was thick and muffled, as if he was speaking through catarrh, and he had a Liverpool accent.

“What do you think?”

Their voices hardly rose above a whisper.

“Can you move at all?”

The first man tried to push himself up. There was another grunt of pain. The second man offered his hand, and the first managed to stand, but it was obvious that he could only use one leg.

“What we gonna do?” he said.

The moon lit them all brilliantly: the killer, and the man who couldn’t walk, and the dead man. Pan’s heart was thumping so hard that he thought they must be able to hear it.

“You stupid sod. Couldn’t you see he was holding a knife?” said the killer.

“He was too quick—”

“You’re supposed to be good at this. Get out the way.”

The first man hobbled back a pace or two. The killer bent down and picked up the dead man’s ankles, and hauled the body backwards and into the rushes.

Then the killer reappeared and impatiently beckoned the other man forward.

“Lean on me,” he said. “I got half a mind to leave you here on your own. Just a bloody liability. Now I gotta come back and deal with him meself, and that bleeding moon’s getting brighter all the time. Where’s his bag? Wasn’t he carrying a bag?”

“He never had a bag. He never had nothing.”

“He must’ve done. Sod it.”

“Barry’ll come back with you and help.”

“Too noisy. Too nervous. Give us your arm, come on, hurry up.”

“Oh Christ—be careful—aargh, that hurts....”

“Now shut up and move as fast as you can. I don’t care if it hurts. Just keep your bloody mouth shut.”

The first man put his arm around the killer’s shoulders and limped along beside him as they moved slowly beneath the oak tree and back along the riverbank. Pan, looking down, saw a patch of blood on the grass, shining red in the moonlight.

He waited till the men were out of sight, and then prepared to jump down; but before he could move, something stirred in the rushes where the man’s body lay, and something pale and bird-sized fluttered up, falling and flying up again, failing, dropping, but with a last burst of life making directly for Pan.

He was too frightened to move. If the man was dead...But this dæmon looked dead herself—so what could he do? Pan was ready to fight, to flee, to faint; but then she was right there on the branch beside him, struggling to stay there, almost falling off, and he had to reach out and catch her. She felt icy cold, and alive, but only just. The man wasn’t quite dead.

“Help,” she whispered raggedly, “help us—”

“Yes,” he said, “yes—”

“Quickly!”

She fell off and managed to flutter down to the rushes. In a moment Pan had flowed down the trunk of the oak and bounded across towards where she’d vanished, and found the man lying there in the rushes, still just breathing, with the dæmon pressing herself against his cheek.

Pan heard her say, “Dæmon—separate—”

The man turned his head a little and groaned. Pan heard the grating of bone against broken bone.

“Separate?” the man murmured.

“Yes—we learnt to do it—”

“My lucky day. Inside pocket. Here.” He raised a hand with enormous effort and touched the right side of his jacket. “Take it out,” he whispered.

Trying not to hurt him, and fighting the great taboo against touching another person's body, Pan nosed the jacket aside and found a leather wallet in the inside pocket.

"That's it. Take it away. Don't let them get it. It's all up to you and... your..."

Pan tugged, but the wallet wouldn't come, because the jacket was caught under the man's body, and he couldn't move; but after several seconds of difficulty, Pan got it free and pulled it out onto the ground.

"Take it right away...before they come back..."

The pale hawk dæmon was hardly there now, just a wisp of white shadow fluttering and pressing herself to his flesh. Pan hated seeing people die, because of what happened to their dæmons: they vanished like a candle flame going out. He wanted to console this poor creature, who knew she was going to disappear, but all she wanted to do was feel a last touch of the warmth she'd found in her man's body all their lives together. The man took a shallow, rasping breath, and then the pretty hawk dæmon drifted out of existence altogether.

And now Pan had to carry this wallet all the way back to St.Sophia's College, and Lyra's bed.

He gripped it between his teeth and pushed his way up to the edge of the rushes. It wasn't heavy, but it was awkward, and what was worse, it was saturated with the smell of another person: sweat, cologne, smokeleaf. It was being too close to someone who wasn't Lyra.

He got it as far as the fence around the allotment gardens, and then stopped for a rest. Well, he would have to take his time. There was plenty of night left.

* * *

Lyra was deep in sleep when a shock woke her up, like a sudden fall, something physical, but what? She reached for Pan, and remembered that he wasn't there: so had something happened to him? It was far from the first night she'd had to go to bed alone, and she hated it. Oh, the folly of going

out by himself in that way, but he wouldn't listen, he wouldn't stop doing it, and one day they'd both pay the price.

She lay awake for a minute, but sleep was gathering around her again, and soon she surrendered and closed her eyes.

* * *

The bells of Oxford were striking two o'clock when Pan climbed in. He laid the wallet on the table, working his mouth this way and that to relieve his aching jaw before pulling out the book with which she'd propped open the window for him. He knew it: it was a novel called *The Hyperchorasmians*, and Pan thought Lyra was paying it far too much attention. He let it fall to the floor and then cleaned himself meticulously before pushing the wallet into the bookcase and out of sight.

Then he leapt up lightly onto her pillow. In the ray of moonlight that came through a gap in the curtains, he crouched and gazed at her sleeping face.

Her cheeks were flushed, her dark-gold hair was damp; those lips that had whispered to him so often, and kissed him, and kissed Will too, were compressed; a little frown hovered on her brow, coming and going like clouds in a windy sky—they all spoke of things that were not right, of a person who was becoming more and more unreachable to him, as he was to her.

And he had no idea what to do about it. All he could do was lie down close against her flesh; that at least was still warm and welcoming. At least they were still alive.