

Extract from *The Secret Commonwealth: The Book of Dust Volume Two* by Philip Pullman

The twenty-year-old Lyra has to flee Oxford by boat for the third time in her life, this time in the company of the old gyptian Giorgio Brabandt. As they sail towards the safety of the Fens, they hear a zeppelin approaching.

As darkness was falling at the edge of the Fens, rain began to fall too. It was the time of day when Giorgio Brabandt usually began to look for a likely spot to moor for the night, but as they were so close to his native waters, he was inclined to keep moving. He knew every twist and turn of these mazy waterways, and the lights he sent Lyra to mount at the stem and the stern were a matter of courtesy to any fellow boaters, not a necessity to show the way.

‘When do we get into the Fens, Master B?’ said Lyra.

‘We’re there now,’ he said. ‘More or less. There en’t no frontier nor customs post, nothing like that. One minute you’re out, the next minute you’re in.’

‘So how do you know?’

‘You got a feeling for it. If you’re gyptian, it’s like coming home. If you en’t gyptian, you feel uncomfortable, nervous, you feel that all them boggarts and horrors is out there in the water, watching you. Don’t you feel that?’

‘No.’

‘Oh. Well we can’t be there yet. Or else I en’t told you enough stories.’

He was standing at the tiller, in oilskins and sou’wester, while Lyra sat just inside the doorway wrapped in an old coat of his. The stern light threw a yellow outline around his bulky form, and lit up the incessant raindrops that filled the air. Lyra was aware of the potatoes cooking on the naphtha stove in the galley behind her; she’d go in soon and cut some slices of bacon to fry.

‘When d’you think we’ll get to the Zaal?’ she said.

‘Ah, there’s a way to tell that.’

‘What is it?’

‘When you’re close enough to see it, you’re almost there.’

‘Well, that’s helpful, I must—’

He suddenly put up a hand to hush her, and at the same moment his dæmon looked up. Brabandt sheltered his eyes with the brim of his sou'wester and peered up too, and Lyra followed their example. She could see nothing, but heard a distant rumble from the upper air.

'Lyra, run forrard and dowse that glim,' said Brabandt, easing the throttle back and reaching out with his other hand for the stern light.

The light at the prow was reflected along the length of the cabin roof, so Lyra could see easily enough to run along and jump down. When she reached up and turned the wick down to extinguish the flame she could hear the sound more easily, and a moment later she could see the source of it: the pale egg-like form of a zeppelin, cruising slowly some way behind them on the starboard side, below the clouds, and showing no lights.

She felt her way back to the cockpit. Brabandt had steered the *Maid of Portugal* in towards the side and cut the engine to a murmur. As Lyra jumped down she felt a little jolt as the boat touched the grassy bank.

'You see it?' he said quietly.

'I can see one. Are there more?'

'One's enough. Is it follerin us?'

'No. I shouldn't think they can have seen the lights yet, not through this rain. And the noise that engine is making, they'd never be able to hear ours.'

'I'm going to move along then,' he said.

He pushed the throttle forward, and the engine responded with a gentle rumble. The boat moved on.

'How can you see?' said Lyra.

'Instinct. Keep your trap shut. I need to listen.'

She remembered the potatoes, and ran inside to take them off the stove and drain them. The warm comfortable old cabin, the clean galley, the steam, the smell of the cooked potatoes – they felt like a bulwark against the danger above; but she knew they were nothing of the sort, and that a bomb well aimed would kill her and Brabandt and sink the *Maid* in a matter of moments.

She hurried from end to end of the boat, checking all the blinds. There wasn't a single chink. Finally she extinguished the light in the galley and went out to the cockpit again.

The roar of the zeppelin's engine was loud now. It sounded as if it was directly overhead. She squinted up through the lashing rain, and could see nothing.

'Psst,' said Brabandt quietly. 'Look out starboard.'

Lyra stood up and stared as hard as she could, ignoring the rain in her eyes, and this time saw a little flickering greenish light. It was inconstant, but it always came back, after vanishing for a second or two, and it was moving.

'Is that another boat?' she said.

'It's a will-o'-the-wyke. A jacky-lantern.'

'There's another!'

A second light, reddish in colour, appeared and disappeared not far from the first. Lyra watched them approach each other, touching, disappearing, and then flickering up again a little way apart.

The *Maid of Portugal* continued to move ahead, steady and slow, as Brabandt kept checking left and right, listening, peering, even lifting his face to sniff at the air. The rain was beating down harder than ever. The marsh lights seemed to be keeping pace with the boat, and then Lyra realised that the zeppelin overhead had moved a little in their direction, as if to see what they were. The engine sounded very loud, very close, and she wondered how the pilot could see anything at all in the murk. The boat was leaving no wake, and every light on board was out.

'There's another one,' Lyra said.

A third light had joined the first two, and now they set up a weird halting, pausing, swerving dance. The cold inconstant glimmer made Lyra feel uneasy. Only the solid deck beneath her feet and the bulky presence of Giorgio Brabandt saved her from a sickly fear of things that were outside, just beyond the reach of reason, inhabiting the dark.

'It's going that way,' said Brabandt.

He was right. As if it was being pulled, the zeppelin was moving to starboard, towards the marsh lights.

Brabandt pushed the throttle further forward, and the narrow boat picked up speed. In the faint glimmer of the marsh lights Lyra could see him straining every sense, and Anneke his dæmon jumped up on to the cabin roof,

head moving this way and that to catch a fragment of scent that would help avoid a mudbank or steer round a bend.

Lyra almost said 'Can I help?' but realised as she opened her mouth that if he had a task for her, he'd tell her. So she sat down in the doorway again and kept still, and looked out to starboard, where the marsh lights were flickering more brightly than ever.

Suddenly a line of fire streaked down towards the marsh lights from the teeming sky above. It hit the water and exploded in a blossom of orange and yellow flame, and after a second Lyra heard the brief whistle of the flight and the solid crump of the explosion.

The marsh lights went out all at once.

'There,' said Brabandt. 'They broke the law now. They're allowed to fly over, but not to do that.'

Anneke was growling as she stood four-square and gazed at the rapidly fading glow from the rocket.

A moment later a dozen marsh lights flickered again, moving swiftly, darting here and there, even rising and falling. Little jets of fire spurted up from the ground, to flare and go out in a moment.

'That's made 'em angry,' said Brabandt. 'Trouble is, they're showing us up.'

The boat was still purring forward into the dark, but he was right: the marsh lights were so fierce and brilliant now that, small as they were, they illuminated the whole length of the *Maid of Portugal*, streaming with rain and catching every flicker of light.

'They don't like us, the will-o'-the-wykeses, but they like them zeppelins even less,' Brabandt said. 'But they still don't like us. Wouldn't bother 'em a bit if we got sunk and drowned, or smashed into a thousand splinters.'

Anneke barked, a short yap of alarm. She was looking up, and Lyra, following her gaze, saw a little shape falling from the zeppelin and briskly unfolding into a parachute. Almost at once the wind caught it and tossed it backwards, but then the black shape under the canopy burst into a brilliant flame.

'Flares,' said Brabandt, as another fell, blossomed, and blazed.

The response from the marsh lights was instant and furious. More and more of them flickered into being and leaped and danced towards the falling flare, and when it reached the water, they swarmed all over it, their cold fire mastering its heat and finally drowning it in a cloud of smoke and a chorus of wet little shrieks and sucking noises.

Suddenly Lyra jumped up and ran inside, feeling her way along the length of the boat to her little cabin in the prow. She felt for her bunk, felt the bedside table, moved her hands over the book and the lamp until they found the velvet bag that held the alethiometer. With that safely in both hands she moved back through the boat, conscious of the little movements Brabandt was making with the wheel and the throttle, of the roar from the zeppelin's engine somewhere above, of the moaning of the wind. From the galley she saw Brabandt at the tiller outlined against the flickering marsh lights, and then she was in the doorway again, and sat on the bench from where she could see out.

'All right?' said Brabandt.

'Yes. I'm going to see what I can find out.'

She was already turning the little wheels of the alethiometer, and peering close in the intermittent glimmer to try and make out the symbols. But it was no good: they were more or less invisible. She held the instrument between her palms, and stared fiercely out at the flickering jacky-lanterns, aware of a powerful contradiction that almost tore her mind in two. What she wanted to do would involve this secret commonwealth of Brabandt's, and yet she told herself it was nonsense, superstition, nothing but meaningless fancy.

The zeppelin was turning around ahead of them, its searchlight probing the rain and the dark marsh gloom below it. Another minute or two, and it would be facing them, and once it had the *Maid of Portugal* fixed in the glare of the light, nothing would save them.

Pan, Pan, Pan, Lyra thought, *I need you now, you little bastard, you traitor.*

She tried to imagine gathering all the jacky-lanterns as if she was herding sheep, but it was so hard, because after all she had no imagination, as Pan had said. What would it be like to do that? She thought harder and harder. She thought of herself as a light-herd, and the absent Pan as a light-dog, racing from

side to side across the marsh, crouching down still, leaping up again, barking short sharp commands, running where she thought him to.

And how stupid, she thought, how childish. It's just methane or something. It's just natural, meaningless. Her concentration faltered.

She heard a sob coming from her throat, completely against her will.

Brabandt said, 'What you doing, gal?'

She ignored him. She gritted her teeth and summoned the absent Pan again, a hell-hound now, with glowing eyes and slaver flying from his lips, and she saw the terrified marsh lights fleeing and flocking and circling round as the zeppelin's cold beam of light came closer and closer and she heard the drumming of rain on the great snout-prow of the aircraft, even over the wind and the roar of the engine.

She felt something rising inside her, like a tide, wave upon wave of it, growing and receding and then growing again, a little more each time, and it was anger, it was desire, it was visceral.

'What they doing? Good God – look at that . . .' Brabandt was saying.

The marsh lights were speeding and climbing, dashing again and again at a spot on the water just ahead of the zeppelin's searchlight, and then with a shriek something rose out of the marsh that wasn't a jacky-lantern nor a will-o'-the-wyke but a large bird, a heron or even a stork, heavy and white and terrified by the darting green glimmers that harried it up and up and into the beam of the searchlight, and higher still, snapping at its legs, crowding like hornets at its great hefty body as it lumbered up in fear and hurled itself at the aircraft—

Brabandt said hoarsely, 'Hold tight, gal.' The searchlight beam was nearly on them.

Then in an explosion of fire and blood and white feathers, the heron flew straight into the port engine of the zeppelin.

The aircraft lurched and swung to the left at once, and dipped and sagged as the starboard engine screamed and the great slug-shape drifted sideways and downwards. The tail heaved itself round, caught by the wind with no port engine to stabilise it, and the craft drifted down and down towards the swamp, and closer and closer to the *Maid of Portugal*, as if it were sinking on to a bed. Little scraps of sound, screams, cries, came whirling through the wind and were

snatched away again. By the glow of the dancing marsh lights as well as the fire that was now blazing out of control from the zeppelin, she and Brabandt watched in horror as a figure, two, three, hurled themselves out of the cabin and fell down into the dark. A moment later the great broken shell of the zeppelin collapsed on to the water only fifty yards away from them, surrounded by clouds of steam, and smoke, and flame, and the dance of a thousand marsh lights, capering in triumph. The heat scorched Lyra's face, and Brabandt tilted his sou'wester against it.

It was horrible to watch, but she couldn't look away. The skeleton of the airship showed black against the great blaze of light, and then it crumpled together and fell in with a cascade of sparks and smoke.

'They won't survive that, none of 'em,' said Brabandt. 'They be all dead now.'

'Horrible.'

'Aye.'

He moved the throttle lever, and the boat moved out into the middle of the watercourse and gathered speed slowly.

'That heron,' Lyra said shakily. 'The marsh lights were chasing it. They made it fly up into the engine. They knew what they were doing.'

And so did I, she thought. I made it happen.

'A heron, was it? Might've been. I thought it was a flying boggart. They do fly, some of 'em, making a kind of a whirring noise. Only there was so much else going on we couldn't a heard that. That's probably what it was, a flying elf or a spirit out the waters. Summing from the secret commonwealth, what I told you about. Look at the jacky-lanterns, now.'

The marsh lights, dozens of them, had all gathered around the burning wreck, making little darts towards it and out again, flickering and dancing.

'What are they doing?'

'Looking for any survivors. They'll pull 'em down under the water and finish 'em off. Them potatoes done yet?'

'Oh - yes.'

'Well, don't let 'em get cold. Tell you what, there's a tin of bully beef in the locker. Chop it up with the potatoes and fry the lot. I'm getting peckish.'

Lyra felt sick. She couldn't help thinking of the dead men from the zeppelin, burned or drowned or worse, and of that beautiful white bird, driven up without mercy into the blades of the engine. Food was the last thing she wanted just then, but when the hash was cooking she found that after all, it was a shame to waste it, and it did smell good; so she brought two plates of it to the cockpit, where Brabandt began by scooping up a forkful and dropping it over the side.

'For the will-o'-the-wykes,' he said.

Lyra did the same with hers, and then they ate their supper, sheltering their plates from the rain.