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Moonlight and Bloodshed

Pantalaimon, the dæmon of Lyra Belacqua, now called Lyra Silvertongue, lay along the window sill 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.

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‘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 colour red.

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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 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

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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 leaped 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 on to 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

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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, galvanised 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

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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 up 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

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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 on to 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.

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