

The amber spyglass

chapter 3 scavengers



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Serafina Pekkala, the clan queen of the witches of Lake Enara, wept as she flew through the turbid skies of the Arctic. She wept with rage and fear and remorse: rage against the woman Coulter, whom she had sworn to kill; fear of what was happening to her beloved land; and remorse... She would face the remorse later.

Meanwhile, looking down at the melting ice cap, the flooded lowland forests, the swollen sea, she felt heartsick.

But she didn't stop to visit her homeland, or to comfort and encourage her sisters. Instead, she flew north and farther north, into the fogs and gales around Svalbard, the kingdom of Iorek Byrnison, the armored bear.

She hardly recognized the main island. The mountains lay bare and black, and only a few hidden valleys facing away from the sun had retained a little snow in their shaded corners; but what was the sun doing here anyway, at this time of year? The whole of nature was overturned.

It took her most of a day to find the bear-king. She saw him among the rocks off the northern edge of the island, swimming fast after a walrus. It was harder for bears to kill in the water: when the land was covered in ice and the great sea-mammals had to come up to breathe, the bears had the advantage of camouflage and their prey was out of its element. That was how things should be.

But Iorek Byrnison was hungry, and even the stabbing tusks of the mighty walrus couldn't keep him at bay. Serafina watched as the creatures fought, turning the white sea-spray red, and saw Iorek haul the carcass out of the

waves and onto a broad shelf of rock, watched at a respectful distance by three ragged-furred foxes, waiting for their turn at the feast.

When the bear-king had finished eating, Serafina flew down to speak to him. Now was the time to face her remorse.

" King lorek Byrnison," she said, " please may I speak with you? I lay my weapons down."

She placed her bow and arrows on the wet rock between them. lorek looked at them briefly, and she knew that if his face could register any emotion, it would be surprise.

" Speak, Serafina Pekkala," he growled. " We have never fought, have we?"

" King lorek, I have failed your comrade, Lee Scoresby."

The bear's small black eyes and bloodstained muzzle were very still. She could see the wind ruffling the tips of the creamy white hairs along his back. He said nothing.

" Mr. Scoresby is dead," Serafina went on. " Before I parted from him, I gave him a flower to summon me with, if he should need me. I heard his call and flew to him, but I arrived too late. He died fighting a force of Muscovites, but I know nothing of what brought them there, or why he was holding them off when he could easily have escaped. King lorek, I am wretched with remorse."

" Where did this happen?" said lorek Byrnison.

" In another world. This will take me some time to tell."

" Then begin."

She told him what Lee Scoresby had set out to do: to find the man who had been known as Stanislaus Grumman. She told him about how the barrier between the worlds had been breached by Lord Asriel, and about some of the consequences - the melting of the ice, for example. She told of the witch Ruta Skadi's flight after the angels, and she tried to describe those flying beings to the bear-king as Ruta had described them to her: the light that shone on them, the crystalline clarity of their appearance, the richness of their wisdom.

Then she described what she had found when she answered Lee's call.

" I put a spell on his body to preserve it from corruption," she told him. " It will last until you see him, if you wish to do that. But I am troubled by this, King Iorek. Troubled by everything, but mostly by this."

" Where is the child?"

" I left her with my sisters, because I had to answer Lee's call."

" In that same world?"

" Yes, the same."

" How can I get there from here?"

She explained. Iorek Byrnison listened expressionlessly, and then said, " I shall go to Lee Scoresby. And then I must go south."

" South?"

" The ice has gone from these lands. I have been thinking about this, Serafina Pekkala. I have chartered a ship."

The three little foxes had been waiting patiently. Two of them were lying down, heads on their paws, watching, and the other was still sitting up, following the conversation. The foxes of the Arctic, scavengers that they were, had picked up some language, but their brains were so formed that they could only understand statements in the present tense. Most of what lorek and Serafina said was meaningless noise to them. Furthermore, when they spoke, much of what they said was lies, so it didn't matter if they repeated what they'd heard: no one could sort out which parts were true, though the credulous cliff-ghasts often believed most of it, and never learned from their disappointment. The bears and the witches alike were used to their conversations being scavenged as well as the meat they'd finished with.

" And you, Serafina Pekkala?" lorek went on. " What will you do now?"

" I'm going to find the gyptians," she said. " I think they will be needed."

" Lord Faa," said the bear, " yes. Good fighters. Go well."

He turned away and slipped into the water without a splash, and began to swim in his steady, tireless paddle toward the new world.

And some time later, lorek Byrnison stepped through the blackened undergrowth and the heat-split rocks at the edge of a burned forest. The sun was glaring through the smoky haze, but he ignored the heat as he ignored

the charcoal dust that blackened his white fur and the midges that searched in vain for skin to bite.

He had come a long way, and at one point in his journey, he had found himself swimming into that other world. He noticed the change in the taste of the water and the temperature of the air, but the air was still good to breathe, and the water still held his body up, so he swam on, and now he had left the sea behind and he was nearly at the place Serafina Pekkala had described. He cast around, his black eyes gazing up at the sun-shimmering rocks and the wall of limestone crags above him.

Between the edge of the burned forest and the mountains, a rocky slope of heavy boulders and scree was littered with scorched and twisted metal: girders and struts that had belonged to some complex machine. Iorek Byrnison looked at them as a smith as well as a warrior, but there was nothing in these fragments he could use. He scored a line with a mighty claw along a strut less damaged than most, and feeling a flimsiness in the quality of the metal, turned away at once and scanned the mountain wall again.

Then he saw what he was looking for: a narrow gully leading back between jagged walls, and at the entrance, a large, low boulder.

He clambered steadily toward it. Beneath his huge feet, dry bones snapped loudly in the stillness, because many men had died here, to be picked clean by coyotes and vultures and lesser creatures; but the great bear ignored them and stepped up carefully toward the rock. The going was loose and he was heavy, and more than once the scree shifted under his feet and carried him down again in a scramble of dust and gravel. But as soon as he slid

down, he began to move up once more, relentlessly, patiently, until he reached the rock itself, where the footing was firmer.

The boulder was pitted and chipped with bullet marks. Everything the witch had told him was true. And in confirmation, a little Arctic flower, a purple saxifrage, blossomed improbably where the witch had planted it as a signal in a cranny of the rock.

lorek Byrnison moved around to the upper side. It was a good shelter from an enemy below, but not good enough; for among the hail of bullets that had chipped fragments off the rock had been a few that had found their targets and lay where they had come to rest, in the body of the man lying stiff in the shadow.

He was a body still, and not a skeleton, because the witch had laid a spell to preserve him from corruption. lorek could see the face of his old comrade drawn and tight with the pain of his wounds, and see the jagged holes in his garments where the bullets had entered. The witch's spell did not cover the blood that must have spilled, and insects and the sun and the wind had dispersed it completely. Lee Scoresby looked not asleep, nor at peace - he looked as if he had died in battle - but he looked as if he knew that his fight had been successful.

And because the Texan aeronaut was one of the very few humans lorek had ever esteemed, he accepted the man's last gift to him. With deft movements of his claws, he ripped aside the dead man's clothes, opened the body with one slash, and began to feast on the flesh and blood of his old friend. It was his first meal for days, and he was hungry.

But a complex web of thoughts was weaving itself in the bear-king's mind, with more strands in it than hunger and satisfaction. There was the memory of the little girl Lyra, whom he had named Silvertongue, and whom he had last seen crossing the fragile snow bridge across a crevasse in his own island of Svalbard. Then there was the agitation among the witches, the rumors of pacts and alliances and war; and then there was the surpassingly strange fact of this new world itself, and the witch's insistence that there were many more such worlds, and that the fate of them all hung somehow on the fate of the child.

And then there was the melting of the ice. He and his people lived on the ice; ice was their home; ice was their citadel. Since the vast disturbances in the Arctic, the ice had begun to disappear, and lorek knew that he had to find an icebound fastness for his kin, or they would perish. Lee had told him that there were mountains in the south so high that even his balloon could not fly over them, and they were crowned with snow and ice all year round.

Exploring those mountains was his next task.

But for now, something simpler possessed his heart, something bright and hard and unshakable: vengeance. Lee Scoresby, who had rescued lorek from danger in his balloon and fought beside him in the Arctic of his own world, had died. lorek would avenge him. The good man's flesh and bone would both nourish him and keep him restless until blood was spilled enough to still his heart.

The sun was setting as lorek finished his meal, and the air was cooling down. After gathering the remaining fragments of Lee's body into a single heap, the

bear lifted the flower in his mouth and dropped it in the center of them, as humans liked to do. The witch's spell was broken now; the rest of the body was free to all who came. Soon it would be nourishing a dozen different kinds of life.

Then lorek set off down the slope toward the sea again, toward the south. Cliff-ghasts were fond of fox, when they could get it. The little creatures were cunning and hard to catch, but their meat was tender and rank.

Before he killed this one, the cliff-ghast let it talk, and laughed at its silly babble.

" Bear must go south! Swear! Witch is troubled! True! Swear! Promise!"

" Bears don't go south, lying filth!"

" True! King bear must go south! Show you walrus - fine fat good - "

" King bear go south?"

" And flying things got treasure! Flying things - angels - crystal treasure!"

" Flying things - like cliff-ghasts? Treasure?"

" Like light, not like cliff-ghast. Rich! Crystal! And witch troubled - witch sorry - Scoresby dead - "

" Dead? Balloon man dead?" The cliff-ghast's laugh echoed around the dry cliffs.

" Witch kill him - Scoresby dead, king bear go south - "

" Scoresby dead! Ha, ha, Scoresby dead!"

The cliff-ghast wrenched off the fox's head, and fought his brothers for the entrails.

" But where are you, Lyra?"

And that she couldn't answer. " I think I'm dreaming, Roger," was all she could find to say.

Behind the little boy she could see more ghosts, dozens, hundreds, their heads crowded together, peering close and listening to every word.

" And that woman?" said Roger. " I hope she en't dead. I hope she stays alive as long as ever she can. Because if she comes down here, then there'll be nowhere to hide, she'll have us forever then. That's the only good thing I can see about being dead, that she en't. Except I know she will be one day... "

Lyra was alarmed.