

## Extract from chapter ten of *La Belle Sauvage*

Eleven-year-old Malcolm lives with his parents at the Trout Inn near Oxford, across the river Thames from Godstow Priory, where the nuns are looking after a special guest. One night his father comes to Malcolm's bedroom.

Now read on:

"Malcolm, you en't in bed yet—good. Come downstairs for a minute. There's a gentleman wants a word with you."

"Who is it?" said Malcolm eagerly, jumping up and following his father out.

"Keep your voice down. He'll tell you who he is if he wants to."

"Where is he?"

"In the Terrace Room. Take him a glass of Tokay."

"What's that?"

"Hungarian wine. Come on, hurry up. Mind your manners and tell the truth."

"I always do," said Malcolm automatically.

"News to me," said his father. But he ruffled Malcolm's hair before they entered the bar.

The gentleman waiting gave him a start, though all he was doing was sitting still by the cold fireplace. Perhaps it was his *dæmon*, a beautiful silvery spotted leopard, or perhaps it was his dark, saturnine expression; in any event, Malcolm felt daunted, and very young and small. His *dæmon*, Asta, became a moth.

"Good evening, sir," he said. "Your Tokay what you ordered. Would you like me to make up the fire? It's ever so cold in here."

"Is your name Malcolm?" The man's voice was harsh and deep.

"Yes, sir. Malcolm Polstead."

"I'm a friend of Dr. Relf," said the man. "My name is Asriel."

"Oh. Er—she hasn't told me about you," Malcolm said.

"Why did you say that?"

"Because if she had, I'd know it was true."

Asriel gave a short laugh.

"I understand," he said. "You want another reference? I'm the father of that baby in the priory."

"Oh! You're Lord Asriel!"

"That's right. But how are you going to test the truth of that claim?"

"What's the baby's name?"

"Lyra."

"And what's her *dæmon* called?"

"Pantalaimon."

"All right," said Malcolm.

"All right now? You sure?"

"No, I en't sure. But I'm more sure than I was."

"Good. Can you tell me what happened earlier this evening?"

Malcolm went through it as fully as he could remember.

"These men came from the Office of Child Protection, and they wanted to take her away. Take Lyra. But Sister Benedicta wouldn't let 'em."

"What did they look like?"

Malcolm described their uniforms. "The one who took his cap off, he seemed like he was in charge. He was more polite than the others, more sort of smooth and smiling. But it was a real smile, not a fake one. I think I'd even've liked him if he'd come in here as a customer—that sort of thing. The other two were just dull and threatening. Most people would've been dead scared, but Sister Benedicta wasn't. She faced 'em off all by herself."

The man sipped his Tokay. His *dæmon* lay with her head up and her front paws stretched out ahead of her, like the picture of the Sphinx in Malcolm's encyclopedia. The black-and-silver patterns on her back seemed to flicker and shimmer for a moment, and then Lord Asriel spoke suddenly.

"Do you know why I haven't been to see my daughter?"

"I thought you were busy. You probably had important things to do."

"I haven't been to see her because if I do, she'll be taken away from there and put in a much less congenial place. There'll be no Sister Benedicta to stand up for her there. But now they're trying to take her anyway. . . ."

"Excuse me, sir, but I told Dr. Relf about all this. Didn't she tell you?"

"Still not quite sure about me?"

"Well . . . no," said Malcolm.

"Don't blame you. You going to go on visiting Dr. Relf?"

"Yes. Because she lends me books as well as listening to what's happened."

"Does she? Good for her. But tell me, the baby—is she being well looked after?"

"Oh, yes. Sister Fenella, she loves her a lot. We all— They all do. She's very happy—Lyra, I mean. She talks to her dæmon all the time, just jabber jabber jabber, and he jabbes back. Sister Fenella says they're teaching each other to talk."

"Does she eat properly? Does she laugh? Is she active and curious?"

"Oh, yeah. The nuns are really good to her."

"But now they're being threatened. . . ."

Asriel got up and went to the window to look at the few lights from the priory across the river.

"Seems like it, sir. I mean, Your Lordship."

"Sir' will do. You know them well, these nuns?"

"I've known 'em all my life, sir."

"And they'd listen to you?"

"I suppose they would, yes."

"Could you tell them I'm here and I'd like to see my daughter?"

"When?"

"Right now. I'm being pursued. The High Court has ordered me not to go within fifty miles of her, and if I'm found here, they'll take her away and put her somewhere else where they aren't so careful."

Malcolm was torn between saying, "Well, you ought not to risk it, then," and simple admiration and understanding: of course the man would want to see his daughter, and it was wicked to try to prevent him.

"Well . . .," Malcolm thought, then said, "I don't think you could see her right now, sir. They go to bed ever so early. I wouldn't be surprised if they were all fast asleep. In the morning they get up ever so early too. Maybe—"

"I haven't got that long. Which room have they made into a nursery?"

"Round the other side, sir, facing the orchard."

"Which floor?"

"All their bedrooms are on the ground floor, and hers is too."

"And you know which one?"

"Yes, I do, but—"

"You could show me, then. Come on."

There was no refusing this man. Malcolm led him out of the Terrace Room and along the corridor, and out onto the terrace before his father could see them. He closed the door very quietly behind them and found the garden brilliantly lit by the clearest full moon there'd been for months. It felt as if they were being lit by a floodlight.

"Did you say there was someone pursuing you?" said Malcolm quietly.

"Yes. There's someone watching the bridge. Is there any other way across the river?"

"There's my canoe. It's down this way, sir. Let's get off the terrace before anyone sees us."

Lord Asriel went beside him across the grass and into the lean-to where the canoe was kept.

"Ah, it's a proper canoe," said Lord Asriel, as if he'd been expecting a toy. Malcolm felt a little affronted on behalf of La Belle Sauvage and said nothing as he turned her over and let her slip quietly down the grass and onto the water.

"First thing," he said, "is we'll go downstream a short way, so's no one can see us from the bridge. There's a way into the priory garden on that side. You get in first, sir."

Asriel did so, much more capably than Malcolm had anticipated, and his leopard dæmon followed, with no more weight than a shadow. The canoe hardly moved at all, and Asriel sat down lightly and kept still as Malcolm got in after him.

"You been in a canoe before," Malcolm whispered.

"Yes. This is a good one."

"Quiet, now . . ."

Malcolm pushed off and began to paddle, staying close to the bank under the trees and making no noise at all. If there was one thing he was good at, this was it. Once they were out of sight of the bridge, he turned the boat to starboard and made for the other shore.

"I'm going to come up alongside a willow stump," he said very quietly. "The grass is thick there. We'll tie her up and go back across the field, behind the hedge."

Lord Asriel was just as good at getting out as he'd been at getting in. Malcolm couldn't imagine a better passenger. He tied the boat to a stout willow branch growing from the stump, and a few seconds later they were moving along the edge of the meadow, under the shade of the hedge.

Malcolm found the gap he knew about and forced his way through the brambles. It must have been harder for the man, being bigger, but he didn't say a word. They were in the priory orchard; the lines of plum trees and apple trees, of pear trees and damson trees, stood bare and neat and fast asleep under the moon.

Malcolm led the way around the back of the priory and came to the side where the window of Lyra's nursery would be, if it hadn't been hidden by the new shutters. They did look remarkably solid.

He counted once more to make sure it was the right one, and then tapped quietly on the shutter with a stone. Lord Asriel was standing close by. The moon was shining full on this side of the building, so they would both be clearly visible from some way off.

Malcolm whispered, "I don't want to wake any of the other nuns, and I don't want to startle Sister Fenella because of her heart. We got to be careful."

"I'm in your hands," said Lord Asriel.

Malcolm tapped again a little harder.

"Sister Fenella," he whispered.

No response. He tapped a third time.

"Sister Fenella, it's me, Malcolm," he whispered.

What he was really worried about was Sister Benedicta, of course. He dreaded to think what would happen if he woke her, so he kept as quiet as he could while still trying to wake Sister Fenella, which was not easy.

Asriel stood still, watching and saying nothing.

Finally Malcolm heard a stirring inside the room. Lyra gave a little mew, and then it sounded as if Sister Fenella moved a chair or a small table. Her soft old voice murmured something, like a word or two of comfort to the baby.

He tried again, just a little louder. "Sister Fenella . . ."

A little exclamation of shock.

"It's me, Malcolm," he said.

A soft noise, like the movement of bare feet on the floor, and then the clock of the window catch.

"Sister Fenella—"

"Malcolm? What are you doing?"

Like him, she was whispering. Her voice was frightened and thick with sleep. She hadn't opened the shutter.

"Sister, I'm sorry, I really am," he said quickly. "But Lyra's father's here, and he's being pursued by—by his enemies, and he really needs to see Lyra before—before he goes on somewhere else. To—to say goodbye," he added.

"Oh, that's nonsense, Malcolm! You know we can't let him—"

"Sister, please! He's really in earnest," Malcolm said, finding that phrase from somewhere.

"It's impossible. You must go away now, Malcolm. This is a bad thing to ask. Go away before she wakes up. I daren't think what Sister Benedicta—"

Malcolm didn't dare think it either. But then he felt Lord Asriel's hand on his shoulder, and the man said, "Let me speak to Sister Fenella. You go and keep watch, Malcolm."

Malcolm moved away to the corner of the building. From there he could see the bridge and most of the garden, and watched as Lord Asriel leaned towards the shutter and spoke quietly. It was a whisper; Malcolm could hear nothing at all. How long Asriel and Sister Fenella spoke he couldn't have guessed, but it was a long time, and he was shivering hard when he saw, to his amazement, the heavy shutter move slowly. Lord Asriel stood back to let it open, and then stepped in again, showing his open, weapon-less hands, turning his head a little to let the moonlight fall clearly on his face.

He whispered again. Then there was a minute—two minutes, perhaps—in which nothing happened; and then Sister Fenella's thin arms held out the little bundle, and Asriel took it with infinite delicacy. His leopard dæmon stood up to put her forepaws on his waist, and Asriel held the baby down so she could whisper to Lyra's dæmon.

How had he persuaded Sister Fenella? Malcolm could only wonder. He watched the man lift the baby again and walk along the grass between one bare flower bed and the next, holding the bundle high so he could whisper to her, rocking her gently, strolling along slowly in the brilliant moonlight. At one point he seemed to be showing the moon to Lyra, pointing up at it and holding her so she could see, or perhaps he was showing Lyra to the moon; at any rate he looked like a lord in his own domain, with nothing to fear and all the silvery night to enjoy.

Up and down he strolled with his child. Malcolm thought of Sister Fenella waiting in fear—in case Lord Asriel didn't bring her back, in case his enemies attacked, in case Sister Benedicta suspected something was up. But there was no sound from the priory, no sound from the road, no sound from the man and his baby daughter in the moonlight.

At one point the leopard dæmon seemed to hear something. Her tail lashed once, her ears pricked, her head turned to face the bridge. Malcolm and Asta turned immediately, ears and eyes tightly focused on the bridge, every separate stone of which was clearly outlined in black and silver; but nothing moved, and there was no sound but the call of a hunting owl half a mile away.

Presently the leopard dæmon's statue-like stillness melted, and she moved away once more, lithe and silent. Malcolm realized that that was true of the man as well—during their journey over the river and through the meadow, into the orchard and up to the priory wall, he had not heard the slightest sound of footsteps. Asriel might as well have been a ghost, for all the sound he made.

He was turning now at the end of the walk and making for Sister Fenella's window again. Malcolm watched the bridge, the garden, what he could see of the road, and saw nothing wrong; and when he turned, Asriel was handing the little bundle up through the window, whispering a word or two, and silently swinging the shutter closed. Then he beckoned, and Malcolm joined him. It was very difficult to make no noise at all, even on grass, and Malcolm watched to see how the man set his feet down: there was something leopardlike about it—something to practice himself, anyway.

Back through the orchard, back to the hedge, through the brambles, into the meadow, across to the willow stump—Then a stronger, yellower light than the moon stabbed the sky. Someone on the bridge had a searchlight, and Malcolm heard the sound of a gas engine.

"There they are," said Asriel quietly. "Leave me here, Malcolm."

"No! I got a better idea. Take my canoe and go down the river. Just get me back across to the other side first."

The idea occurred to Malcolm in the same moment he said it.

"You sure?"

"You can go downstream a long way. They'll never think of that. Come on!"

He stepped in and untied the painter, holding the boat tight to the bank while Asriel got in too; then Malcolm paddled swiftly and as quietly as he could across to the inn garden, though the current wanted to whirl him out into the open water, where they'd be visible from the bridge.

Asriel caught hold of the fixed line on the little jetty while Malcolm got out; then he let Malcolm hold the boat while he got in the right way round, took the paddle, and held out his hand to shake.

"I'll get her back to you," he said, and then he was gone, speeding with long, powerful strokes down the river on the swollen current, the leopard dæmon like a great figurehead at the prow. *La Belle Sauvage* had never gone so fast, Malcolm thought.

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