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PHILIP PULLMAN

THE BOOK
OF DUST

VOLUME THREE

THE ROSE FIELD

Illustrated by Chris Wormell

DAVID FICKLING BOOKS

in association with

PENGUIN



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PART ONE



1

BEINGS OF ANOTHER KIND

‘But who?’ said Lyra. ‘Who is waiting?’

‘Me,’ said Nur Huda, ‘and my *dæmon*, Jamal, but they won’t—’

‘Is he here? Is your *dæmon* here?’

‘Yes, but they won’t let him – won’t let me . . .’

Lyra stopped. The moonlight shone full in the younger girl’s face, glistening on the lip she was biting and on the unshed tears in her eyes. All around them were tumbled columns of marble, statues of long-forgotten queens or gods, some still intact, and walls and arches and colonnades, gleaming brilliantly white where the moon touched them, among jagged shadows of fathomless black where it did not.

‘But who are *they*?’ said Lyra.

‘Just voices. I don’t know! It’s like a war in here. They fight, and I don’t know why, I don’t know who they are, and I can’t see them. I’m so frightened. Just voices. I can’t see them.’

‘And they won’t let you do what? Take your *dæmon* away, is that it? They’re keeping him prisoner?’

Nur Huda nodded. The movement shook a tear from one eye and she wiped it away with the heel of her hand.

‘And how did you know my name?’

‘Your dæmon told me. Pan. He said you were coming.’

‘Pan? You’ve *seen* Pan? Where? Is he here?’

Lyra’s eagerness was so sudden and passionate that she didn’t even notice that she’d seized the girl’s arm. Nur Huda pulled away, her eyes wide with alarm.

Lyra let go. ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you . . . Only, I’ve been following him all this way, trying to find him, and if he’s not here . . .’

But she’d spoken too quickly, too impatiently. The girl was hungry, and tired, and horribly alone.

She was going to cry, so Lyra hugged her and said, ‘Let’s sit down. We’re both exhausted and frightened. Just tell me everything that happened to you. I won’t interrupt, I promise.’

They sat on a crumbled shelf of stone surrounding a basin where a fountain had once played. A trickle of water still fell from the time-smudged mask of a satyr; it must have gushed from his mouth when it was built, and the spring that supplied it was still flowing. Nur Huda turned and scooped up a handful of water and sipped it. Lyra did the same. It was ice-cold and clean, and she drank some more. She had no idea she was so thirsty.

‘Where have you come from?’ Lyra asked.

‘From Baghdad with my family. But we were in a boat and it sank, and when I swam to the shore I found Jamal was gone. I thought he was dead and that meant I was too, and I was very afraid. I was alone for a while. I didn’t know what to do. But then Pan found me asleep on a hill and he guarded me and when I woke up he told me about you and we thought Jamal might have come to this place so we came here. Pan was with me so it didn’t look as if . . . you know.’

‘Jamal is your dæmon?’

‘Yes.’

‘What did Pan say?’

‘He said he was looking for something you’d lost.’

‘Did he tell you what that was?’

Nur Huda shook her head. ‘He said he was going ahead of you to find it and keep it safe. To the east, where the roses come from, that’s what he said. But he told me you would come here soon and I would know you because you had no dæmon, like me . . .’ Her voice was unsteady.

‘And . . . is Jamal here?’

‘No. I don’t think so. Something happened. A man came out of the desert and was hiding from a giant bird, and then he saw that Jamal was close by, and snatched him before I could reach him.’

‘A man? Was he one of the voices?’

‘No. Only a man. He looked like a Scythian, I don’t know, maybe Chorasmian—’

Lyra blinked with surprise.

Nur Huda noticed, and went on, ‘I don’t know. He might not be real anyway. He’s only got one eye . . . The bird was hunting him. It was so big, when it flew overhead it darkened the whole sky. I thought maybe the man took Jamal to give him to the bird as a – as a, you know, when you throw something to a wolf to distract it . . .’

‘A decoy?’

‘I didn’t know that word. Yes, that. I don’t know, I’m sorry! I’m so frightened . . .’

‘And you said it’s like a war here . . . What did you mean? Dæmons fighting other dæmons, something like that?’

‘I can’t tell. Only that sometimes the air is full of screams and anger and crying. Probably not dæmons. There are not many dæmons here, really. Only the voices . . .’

‘What do they say? What language do they speak?’

‘Many languages. They whisper. Sometimes you think it’s insects, maybe crickets, cicadas, and then you hear them say real words . . .’

‘When do they speak?’

‘You can hear them now.’

Lyra listened. The silence was vast. It was the sort of night when you might hear the planets moving among the stars. She found herself comparing it with the silence in the world of the dead, but that was a closed silence, where nothing was alive, and that world was stale and stuffy, for all its immensity. But the silence in al-Khan al-Azraq was open, and not quite silence either. There were little scratches, little susurrations and clicks and rasps, none of them louder than a pinch of sand dropped on the skin of a snare drum, and they all meant . . . nothing. She remembered a night some years before, in Oxford, when she had thought that everything had a meaning, and had seen how she might understand it. But that was before she'd read Gottfried Brande and Simon Talbot, at a time when Pan was still happy with her.

'You can't hear them?' said Nur Huda.

She spoke tentatively, anxious that Lyra should believe her, and Lyra saw how young the girl was, and how much she'd suffered, and felt how tightly Nur Huda was still gripping her arm.

'Yes, I can a bit, but I don't know what they're saying. Is this the best place to listen to them?'

'It's better in the marketplace. This way.'

They had to clamber over the fallen stones and make their way around the broken walls of a basilica before they came to an open area that did look like a marketplace, a public space to hold meetings: a forum.

The sand underfoot was so fine and white that it might have been newly milled flour. In the centre of the forum there was a plinth where a statue had once stood. The statue itself lay in three pieces beside it, toppled by an earthquake, perhaps: a bearded god whose sightless eyes glared up at the moon. Lyra and Nur Huda sat on his muscular chest. There was nothing moving in the forum, not a sign of life anywhere, and everything around was drenched in moonlight and frozen in stillness.

Lyra gradually became more aware of the scratchy little susurrus, the scraping of insect claws, the clicks and rustlings like

dry leaves in a porcelain bowl being stirred by a breeze. The girl's arm pressing against hers, her flesh warm in the cold air, made Lyra realise a little of what their dæmons must be feeling, so bare and vulnerable away from the solid comfort of a human body.

She gathered her breath to say something, but Nur Huda whispered, 'Sssh . . .'

Lyra could hear no difference in the tiny scratchings and scrapes. She strained to hear better, and tried to focus her ears on whatever was there, and then remembered Giorgio Brabandt telling her how to see the secret commonwealth: *You got to look at it sideways*, he'd said. *Out the corner of your eye. So you gotta think about it out the corner of your mind. It's there and it en't, both at the same time.*

Of course. She shouldn't strain at it. She should listen as if she was reading the alethiometer in the old way, as if it didn't mean anything, and as if it did. She relaxed her mind and her eyes and her ears, and let the night flow in and out of her body. A nimbus of perception spread out around her as if her senses themselves were slowly merging with the city of the moon.

And in the clicks and rasps and scratches she began to hear words:

. . . you alone . . . we want you to hear . . . this is not for the girl . . . send her to the fountain . . . this is your task, not hers . . .

Nur Huda heard them as well. She gripped Lyra's arm more tightly and began to say something, but Lyra hushed her and she fell silent. The voices were scratching softly at the silence.

. . . girl . . . Nur Huda . . . you must leave us . . . go to the fountain . . . wait there . . . you will know when we have finished . . .

Nur Huda whispered, 'Should I go?'

'Yes,' Lyra whispered in return. 'Go there now and wait. I'll come and find you soon.'

The girl rose unsteadily and walked away, looking back every few steps as if to make sure Lyra was still there. The floury sand rose up like mist around her feet as she made her way out of the forum, and then settled back infinitely slowly.

Lyra waited till everything was still. Then she said into the dark,
 ‘Who are you? Are you angels?’

... we are beings of another kind ...

‘Are you part of the secret commonwealth?’

... deeper by far than that ... we come from the gulfs between the good numbers ...

‘The gulfs between ... Did I hear you properly?’

No reply.

‘Then tell me something else,’ she said. ‘Tell me what’s in the red building in the desert of Karamakan. The building the roses come from.’

... an opening into another world ...

Lyra was silent for a moment. The stars wheeled overhead.

‘An opening – d’you mean the sort of thing Will used to call a window?’

... a doorway into another world ... that is why they guard it so fiercely ...

‘The world where the roses come from?’

... they could come from nowhere else ...

As simple as that, and she hadn’t thought of it. A knife-bearer from Cittàgazze, long ago, must have cut that window in his travels from world to world, and left it open. Her grasp on things was loosening, and she felt giddy, as if she’d lost her sense of up and down, of now and of then, of here and of everywhere.

The voices said something else, but she didn’t understand it.

... the alkahest ...

‘The ... alphabet? Is that what you said?’

... the alkahest ...

‘Alkahest? What’s that?’

... the destroyer of bonds ...

She heard it clearly, and it was impossible to understand. ‘What d’you mean? What about this alkahest? What is it?’

... destroy everything ...

Lyra was bewildered. It was too much. She dragged herself back to the present task. ‘Where is Nur Huda’s dæmon? Where is Jamal?’

... in the treasury ...

‘And where’s that?’

... behind you ...

Lyra turned to look. The building that had stood there was now a jumbled heap of stones, with a few dry shrubs growing through them.

She said, ‘Who is keeping him prisoner?’

... a man who is asleep ...

Her eyes had become used to the moonlight; it was almost as clear as day, and she stepped easily over the stones and looked more closely at the place called the treasury. It was the sort of place where snakes might easily hide, and scorpions, and venomous spiders. Oh, there were so many things to be afraid of.

She took a deep breath and pressed her hand to her heart to slow the beating. It didn’t work, of course, and she needed both hands to help her clamber over the shattered masonry, so she let her heart do what it wanted and moved on, hand over hand, foot carefully placed before foot. Inside her she carried the new knowledge about the red building in the desert of Karamakan like a precious vessel full to the brim with rare oil. Don’t tremble, don’t trip ...

When she’d gone a little way into the rubble she saw a gap in the ground ahead, and realised it was the shaft of a great staircase leading down deep into the ground. In a treasury, where would you put the most valuable thing? In the vaults under the ground. There must be some kind of strongroom down there ... And how was she going to open it? In the dark? With no tools?

She shrugged. It might not even be possible to reach it. But the steps that led down were not too cluttered with fallen masonry, and the moon was at just the right angle to light the way down, so she had no excuse. Right hand on the wall, left held out for

balance, she made her way carefully downwards, aware all the time of the danger of slipping, twisting an ankle, or worse.

Down, and further down, and still the moonlight lit her way. At the foot of the stairway, she had to stop: the passage that led away into the dark was entirely blocked.

But there at the side, out of the shaft of moonlight, was a man lying on his back, asleep. At first she thought he was dead, he was so still, and her veins flooded with ice-water; but he was snoring quietly, and there was his dæmon, a small desert mammal of some inconspicuous kind, clinging to his shoulder in her sleep. His face had been battered and torn in what must have been a furious attack, and his left eye was missing: the socket lay empty and blood-clotted.

His right arm was resting on something at his side, and when she looked more closely she could see what it was: a crudely made cage about the size of a shoebox, nailed together from rough planks, with a heavy steel mesh front. Inside the cage was a dæmon, Nur Huda's dæmon, a little animal like a mouse with large ears and long back legs like those of a kangaroo. He was crouching in the darkest corner, shivering.

'Are you Jamal?' Lyra whispered.

'Yes – where is Nur Huda?' came the reply, so quiet she could hardly hear it.

'She's waiting for us. I'm going to take you back to her. Who is this man?'

'He caught me and nailed this cage up and I can't get out – he was hiding from a big bird – like an eagle – it was going to take me and he fought to get me away from it and then he put me in this cage – I'm frightened. Who are you?'

'Sssh. My name's Lyra. Keep still and don't talk. I don't want to wake him up.'

She had to reach across the man's body to touch the cage, and he stirred and groaned loudly, startling her. She kept as still as she could till he was snoring again, and then moved her hand to the cage, feeling to see if she could lift it away from his grasp.

But it wasn't going to be possible unless she knelt on his chest: there was nowhere else to lean on, and unless she supported her weight somehow she'd overbalance and wake him up anyway. And her left hand was still painful after her fight with the soldiers on the train from Smyrna just two days ago.

She felt as far as she could around the cage. The wood was very dry and splintery, and the steel mesh was far too strong to bend, and stapled deeply into the wood all the way round.

She sat back to think about it.

Jamal whispered, 'Please, can you open it?'

'Sssh.'

She was aware of the moon moving across the sky: the shaft of light was moving too, and unless she got the dæmon out soon she'd have to work in the dark. If only Will . . . If only the subtle knife . . . It would cut through the mesh in a moment.

A thousand things distracted her. The smell of the sleeping man: not just a dirty body and unwashed clothes, but something worse, like gangrene. She saw that his leg was injured as well as his eye; he'd probably die soon. The sound of something much deeper underground, the faintest possible rumble, like rocks grinding together. The stillness of the air, the closeness and clamminess down here in the vault.

A thought struck her like an arrow.

The alethiometer—

The metal of the needle—

The Welsh miners on the North Sea ferry had noticed it. So had Will, a long time before. It was the same colour, the same material, as the subtle knife.

She moved away a little further, back into the shaft of moonlight, and felt in her rucksack for the alethiometer. Its familiar weight sat in her hand so rightly, and she raised it to her cheek and held it there for a few seconds, loving it.

She'd never opened it, never tried to prise it apart, but there must be a way of doing so. The mechanism had been made by a