



Dear Child, Avensbeck

Lyra's heart chilled when she saw the line of horses on the horizon.

They were raiders—of course—driving their mangy horses far past exhaustion through the desert, burdened down with the spoils the men had ripped from many a fair house and honest home.

She need not see them up close to know who they were. The Hem'hi, a war band of criminals, highway thieves, and bandits. The war band she had once belonged to.

“What are those people, Mother?” Minna asked, staring up at Lyra with wide eyes and clutching at Lyra's skirt.

“Bad people,” Lyra said, her voice breaking. She steeled herself. “We have to go now, Minna, okay?” She pulled Minna's hands off her legs and dragged the girl across the gravel, nearly making Minna stumble. “Quickly, quickly little one.”

“But what about our buckets?” Minna asked. “Wait, we need our buckets.” She gestured at the wooden pails full of cactus sap Lyra had been collecting as antiseptic.

“The buckets will be okay, Minna,” Lyra said, her breathing unsteady as she scanned the horizon for some form of escape. She glanced over her shoulder at the raiders, struggling to swallow the nausea that was rising inside of her.

She had never expected to run into her old gang of bandits while out collecting cactus sap. No, not a in a thousand ages. The villagers had been right— bringing Minna out into the desert was dangerous. “No real woman worthy of motherhood takes their daughter out there,” they had laughed at her. At the time, Lyra had ignored them.



“What are the bad people going to do to us, Mother?” Minna asked. “I’m scared, Mother. I don’t want to run.”

“We must run,” Lyra said. Her voice rose to a shout. “We must run, my little one.” She swallowed back another gasping breath. What else could she do?

What would those bandits do to the woman who had once been one of the most ferocious warriors in the band? To the woman who had deserted them, deserted them for a tiny orphan baby she had fallen in love with? To the woman who had then pretended to be the girl’s mother and settled down for a peaceful life in a happy village? Lyra knew what they would do. She had been one of them, after all.

Minna began to cry, her lip quivering, and Lyra clutched her sweat-slicked hand and dragged her along ever faster. “Run, Minna, run.” She glanced at the pack of bandits. They were much closer now, each man’s face almost discernable by the features Lyra remembered so well. Lyra was such a fool. She would never outrun horses.

Bending down, she scooped Minna up like she was no bigger than the cloth-wrapped baby Lyra had found so long ago, alone and parentless. No bigger than the baby Lyra had come to love so dearly, who had given her a chance at a new life. Despite how her arms trembled, she didn’t feel Minna’s weight, just her need to somehow keep her safe.

“Who are those people?” Minna said again. Tears were running down her face, and her words came out choked. “Why are they coming?”

Stumbling across the rocky gravel, Lyra looked down at the child in her arms. She remembered the first steps Minna had taken, cooing as she walked around on her own for the first time. She remembered how the townsfolk had laughed, telling Lyra she could never properly raise the child. How Minna had healed Lyra’s soul, like ointment spread over the burns, and Lyra had been her mother.



“I never should have brought you out here,” Lyra whispered, hot tears pricking at her eyes. “I was such a fool. They were right. I was never really fit to raise you. Not after what I was.”

Even the way she ran wasn’t right. Most mothers would have screamed and pleaded for mercy, not tried to run. Not whispered at their child as they did so.

Minna continued to cry, her head jolting with every step Lyra lunged forward, trying to put distance between herself and the men. Behind her, the first war-whoop sounded from the pack of men; not a frenzied one, for it was only one figure they had spotted.

Lyra turned to watch the bandits as they approached, their horses fanning out and slowing down. The man leading them—a one-eyed man with matted black hair—slowed the most as they approached.

He lifted a hand, signaling the rest of the band to halt.

“Nomads!” He cried. “Desert wanderers! Who dares trespass on the lands of the great Hemhi?”

Lyra turned away and bowed her head, swallowing back another bout of nausea. She heard the stamp and snort of the horses around her; the jingling of the men’s gear and their under-the-breath curses at having to stop for a lone woman with a child in the desert. Minna clutched at Lyra with hands like claws, not daring to let go. She sobbed quietly into Lyra’s shoulder.

“Answer!” the man said. “Do you really not know who we are?”

Minna’s face was so soft against Lyra’s shoulder. Softer than down, than anything Lyra had ever felt in her life. Soft because it was kind, and it loved her, the only thing in the world to ever love Lyra back. Lyra stroked Minna’s hair and rocked her back and forth like she was still a baby.

A rough hand grabbed Lyra by the neck and shoved her around to face the one-eyed man, crushing her throat. It released to let her speak.



“I know who you are,” Lyra said. “I know who you are, Malus.” She squeezed Minna tight against her. “And I think you know who I am too.”

Malus frowned, already reaching for the dagger at his side. He narrowed his eyes and regarded her. Then his eyes widened.

“Lyra?”

“The same,” Lyra said. She could not meet Malus’ eye like she used to do. She stared instead at Minna, clasped to her breast.

“Oh, Lyra,” Malus laughed. “It’s been so long. What is that thing you got yourself? Is it a child?” Lyra looked up to see him toss his hand in the air. “How delightful. You’ve turned yourself into a village woman.”

As if understanding his words, Minna clutched Lyra even tighter. “Save me, Mother,” she said. “Please save me from this mean man.”

Lyra felt at that moment she could not even hold Minna any longer. She did not deserve the girl’s love, her goodness, her kindness. Lyra was a monster; it was she who had brought Lyra out into the desert. But it was worse than that.

Malus spoke again. “Did you forget our code, Lyra? Did you forget that we have sworn to hunt down the deserters of our band and to punish them for their wrongs?” He leaned forward in his saddle. “To punish their families for their wrongs?”

Lyra couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t stand. She fell onto the dirt and gravel, still holding Minna tightly. Yes, the bandits had sworn to hunt down anyone who deserted them. Most deserters who even survived knew not to have anything to do with a family, because the bandits would punish their families, too. And Lyra had known it all since the first time she had held Minna in her arms.



“Did you forget that when you left, we swore to find you again?” Malus asked. “Did you forget our oath of vengeance when you decided to take the child?”

She had known it. She had known no deserter of the Hemhi could have a peaceful life or have children. They were more than bandits; they were half-beast, bound by oaths unbreakable. In her pride—her folly—she had thought she could elude them. Thought she could love and the raise the tiny girl who had snatched away her heart. From the very first moment she had picked Minna up, Lyra had condemned her to die.

She had found the girl abandoned, lying in her swaddling cloths, alone and parentless. The child had stolen Lyra’s heart; Lyra took her to the village and raised the girl as her mother, determined to forget about her past as a bandit and start something new. To give Lyra life, and a mother’s love. All the while knowing the Hemhi were out there. Searching for her.

In every moment that Lyra had loved the girl, she had really been killing her. When she nursed the girl to health, it was a health that was doomed. When she taught the girl her first letters scratched in charcoal, they were letters that could write the future of the girl’s death. When she sang lullabies to Minna at night, they had been lullabies of foreboding, for Minna’s days became numbered with each night that came and passed.

Malus turned and nodded at the bandits gathered around him. “Here is Lyra,” he proclaimed. “A deserter of the Hemhi. She has spat on our oaths, she has disregarded our precepts. Is she guilty of degrading our name?”

“Guilty,” the men called. But of course they would show her no mercy. Lyra looked about her, remembering. Weston stared at her blankly from saddle; he had once helped her burn down a granary. Laron had been the bandit to catch news of the king’s men tracking them, and they had escaped. The woman seated on a bony pack horse—Cassra had recruited Lyra into the band. None of them cared now; they would as soon see Lyra dead.

Lyra wrapped Minna in her arms, tears running down her cheeks. Tear that burned her like fire, pain so terrible that death seemed like a peaceful slumber in face of it. She squeezed Minna tight,



not caring in those moments how selfish her love of the girl was. It was too late to change now; her selfishness had consumed everything, killed this beautiful, innocent child who lay in her arms.

“I’m surprised at you, Lyra,” Malus said. “I would have thought you someone who wanted to spare a child. Surely you knew...?” his voice trailed away.

Lyra felt at her side for her dagger, but no; she needed to stay alive for Minna in these last moments. Her comfort to the girl felt like a lie, a falsity so enormous it screamed from every fiber of Lyra’s soul. She wished Minna would run, would scream at her, would condemn her for being the liar and murderer that she was. Instead, the girl wrapped her arms around Lyra’s neck.

Lyra heard no more of the men’s words, simply felt them pull her roughly to her feet. She closed her eyes and listened to Minna’s breathing, felt the men lead her further into the ring of horses. Presently they pulled Minna out of Lyra’s arms; the girl was gone, gone forever.

Lyra heard Minna’s cries as they took her away, her screams for help, for Lyra to save her. Lyra stood there motionless, bound from behind by brawny hands that crushed her wrists. As they took Minna away, Lyra called to her. She told Minna how she loved her. Oh, how she loved her. How she loved her, over and over again, as they took the child away to end her life. It was a lie. If Lyra had loved the child, she would have never picked her up and smiled at her giggling face so many years ago.

Lyra did not open her eyes to watch the death, but she heard it. Minna’s crying; the voices of the bandits as Malus commanded them; the snorts of the horses as they pawed the gravel. In one moment it was over and the men remounted their horses, unperturbed by what they had done. It was simply another transaction for them, another deed among thousands. Only this one had left Lyra’s child dead. The men left Lyra in the desert. She heard Malus’ calls as they rode away, proclaiming the bandit group avenged. That was always their tradition; she had known it, of course, that they left deserters stranded in the desert, bound hand and foot.

It was far crueler than death, but Lyra wanted to feel the pain. She wanted to lay for hours in agony over what she had done, because she deserved it more than anything. She deserved this kind of pain



for centuries; for eternities, one after another. Immediate death would have been one last selfish choice, one more selfish act in a life filled with selfish acts.

Lyra lay in the gravel, oblivious to the rising sun baking her face, and simply felt her pain. Knowing that she had been the one—in the end—to make her dear child die.