The holes made me think of the vanishings. Sometimes people disappeared from the Ward. Half Kith entered the prison and never returned. Far worse were the night-snatchings, which happened for no reason anyone understood. I sung him to sleep, a mother said. Tears slipped off her face and onto a tavern table. She said, I

I stopped at the home of Sirah, who was too elderly to shuffle outdoors for the festival, even if it weren’t so cold. As I’d feared, her home had no fire and was freezing. Sirah lay under a mound of blankets. She opened her one eye. The other had been tithed from her when she was young. She had been arrested for wearing cosmetics on her eyelids.

She was lucky. They could have taken both eyes.

It was true. We had kissed, and more, but I had put an end to that. Sometimes I didn’t understand things and felt stupid later. Like how his lovers’ game to protect us from curious eyes hadn’t been a game to him.

“Come inside,” he said.
BOOK REVIEW: THE MIDNIGHT LIE By Mary Rutkoski

But it would be a lie, I had said to Raven when she had suggested that I forge passports, which she would give to those who needed them most. I was anxious about the risk—to her as well as to me. And I didn’t like lying. It was hard for me to tell what was real. Lies made it worse.

It is a midnight lie, she said.

A kind of lie told for someone else’s sake, a lie that sits between goodness and wrong, just as midnight is the moment between night and morning.

Or a lie that is not technically false, like a misleading truth.

I didn’t believe him. It was such a relief, though, to imagine the possibility that I could, so I said nothing to contradict him. I said nothing about the signatures I had forged, the legitimate documents whose words I made fade, then overwrote with new names, new physical descriptions. I said nothing about hearing the body’s fall, or how blood leaked from it like thick red ink. It was so nice to accept,

Aden had shown me how to capture someone’s image with light and a bitumen-coat-plate of tin, to wash the tin with lavender oil to make the image appear. He was good at it. His mother had been good, too, so good that when she decided to leave this city, and abandon Aden around the time when he was no longer a child yet not quite a man, she had thought that an excellent heliograph was all she needed to make her fake passport convincing. She was caught by the militia and sentenced to death. Aden never even received her bones to bury. When the City Council took your body, they took all of it.

Aden had made a heliograph of me. “We could go beyond the wall together,” he had said, setting the small tin square in my palm, “and work in the Middling quarter.” But I couldn’t leave my home. I couldn’t leave Raven, who needed me.

If I left the Ward, who would forge documents for others who wanted to leave? The ones who had seen the blank mother questing the Ward for her night-snatched son, and decided, Not me. Not my child.
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He kissed me and I let him. Sometimes it can feel so good to give someone what they want that it is the next best thing to getting what you want. His hard body was warm as I leaned into him. His mouth was hungry at my neck, beneath the fringe of my chin-length hair. I pretended that his hunger was my hunger. I kissed him back, and the quiet inside me didn’t feel so large anymore, so heavy.

I thought, This is not so bad.

I thought, I could be with him again.

I thought, He loves me.

But what I did surprised me. My hand reached around him and dipped into the bowl of seeds. I closed my fingers around a handful. Tiny and hard. I could feel their shine.

I kissed Aden back, and slipped the seeds into my coat pocket. For good measure, I took the embroidered bag, too.

He started to speak, but the gated door at the end of the hall clanked and creaked. Sid said something swift and angry under his breath in his language, but kept silent when the guard came to collect my blood. Swiftly, I took off Sid’s coat so that the guard wouldn’t notice I was wearing something beyond my kith. I offered my arm through the bars. The needle went right into the bruise that had already formed on my inner right elbow.

“Leeches,” Sid muttered after the guard left with a vial of my blood. “And now you’ll sleep, and I won’t be able to argue with you.”

It was true; I was instantly drowsy. Shivering, I tucked myself back into Sid’s coat. “My sentence is for a month. Maybe yours is, too, and we can argue until we are released.”

“A month? They are going to drain your blood every day for a month?”
was a little taller than me, but not if I were to stand on tiptoe. I was struck, as I had been before, by Sid’s beauty, but it wasn’t that which stole my breath. It was the tunic Sid wore: sleeveless, as I had noticed before in the prison, showing bare, slender arms. What I had not seen then, and could see now, was that the tunic was tight enough that it showed the curve of her breasts.

“Oh,” I said.
She lifted her brows.
My mind scurried back through our conversations. “I thought you...” I couldn’t finish my sentence.
“You thought what?” She frowned, studying my face. Then her expression eased—not in a relaxed way, but rather into tired lines. “I see,” she said. “Well, that’s no fault of mine.”
“I didn’t say—”
“I can’t help what you assumed. Did I say I was a man?”
“No.” My face grew hot as I newly understood things she had said.
“Disappointed?”
It wasn’t normal to feel drawn to her—not in the way I now knew I had been.
I started to shrug out of her coat. “Here,” I said. “Thank you.”

Later, I wished that I had called to her, that I had said I missed her as soon as she turned to walk away. I wished she had seen how I brought my hand to my cheek. Her touch shivered down my back.
It lingered long after she passed through the wall’s gate.

Morah stared when she saw me. “Three days only? Your face ... where did you pay?” She looked ready to open my coat, to rummage over my body until she found the damage she was sure they must have left.
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... 

She swung the oil lamp. It smashed against my cheek. I felt a lick of hot pain. I heard cries. I clapped a hand to my blazing cheek.

“How dare you,” Raven said. “After all these years, after all the care I put into you.”

I shrank back from her, glass cracking under my sandals. “The coat has nothing to do with it. Please, listen to me.” I babbled the story of what had happened.

“You caught the bird?” Annin’s voice was filled with wonder.

Raven turned to look at her and Morah. “Go to your rooms.”

“But Nirrim,” Annin said. “You have burned her!”

But she had known what I was. She had been flirting with me.

And I had liked it. A flush in my cheek burned beneath the lamp-oil burn. A confused, private feeling bundled itself up inside me. It curled around the idea of her.

I told her I loved her, too. She guided me upstairs as though I were half my age. She tucked me into my bed, just like a real mother, and tsked when she lightly touched my throbbing cheek. “You must see to that in the morning,” she said. When she lost her temper, and hurt me, she was always so tender afterward, as though I were her treasure. It felt so good that it was almost worth being punished. And didn’t parents correct their children, so that they would learn?

There was no harm, I thought. No one was watching me.

I had already broken so many serious laws. I had illegally forged documents. I had killed a man. Reading beyond my kith was nothing in comparison.
Then I realized it was because the love poems were written about a woman.
In my mind I saw the poet and the woman she loved, mouths damp from kissing, limbs tangled together. A flush crept into my cheeks.

It wasn’t allowed for a woman to love a woman, at least not in the Ward. It was a shameful thing. I couldn’t even guess the tithe.

The Council encouraged Half Kith to marry. Babies are a blessing, we were told. Larger homes were allocated for growing families. Special Council-funded rations were awarded for births. I wasn’t sure what a woman did with a woman in bed, but I knew that it didn’t make children.

“How,” I said, “did you know?”

“Next time, pretend like you belong. Lie to yourself until you believe it.”

Could I do that?

“It’s a midnight lie,” he said reassuringly. “High Kith are easier to fool than Middlings, since we mix around the city a lot and see all sorts of people.”

I thought about how I had believed Sid to be a boy simply because of her hair and clothes and that it was dark.

Well, and how she spoke about women.

How she spoke about me.
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I let the small shards in my hand tinkle to the ground, and reached to collect the longest one, by his foot.

“Yes. That one. It is truly brainless, is it not, brother, even for a Middling? Now, fly. Cut yourself.”

I froze, the shard in my hand. “What?”

“Cut yourself, I said. Your finger, your hand, I do not care. This is my dream. You will do as I say.”

“I don’t—”

“I want to taste it.”

“Brother.” The crimson man rolled his eyes. “You know that Middling blood is useless.”

The other wagged his finger. “We do not know. This is a dream. The rules might be different. Three drops, little fly. Right on my tongue. And then”—his chin lifted proudly—“I will help you.”

Hope lifted into my throat. Three drops of blood was an easy price to pay. If this had been a tithe, it would have been one of the gentlest, the kind taken from children. The man stood, head tilted back, mouth wide-open.

“I wish you could see yourself, brother.” The crimson man giggled.

I pricked my finger. Blood welled. I squeezed three quivering drops into the High-Kith’s mouth. He swallowed.

I looked at the labels on the vials. Dreamofdemons.Dreamofsaviors.Dreamofpurpledonkeys.Dreamofkisses…I stopped reading. I did not want kisses. I already knew what they were like.

I wasn’t thinking anymore about the vial in my hand. I was remembering how the man had frozen, staring. “My blood did something to him.”

The man leaped, but missing, then the knight took him up to “Niko.” Th
“Drunken. Drugged. Or both. They definitely drank or ate something weird long before they began roaming the night market. The High Kith have got all sorts of stuff to addle their brains.”

“Magic,” I said.

“Hallucinations,” he corrected. “Clever tricks to make the High Kith spend more money. The things people call ‘magic’ don’t last. A flower that sings as it opens its petals? Withered and dead within a day. A tiny key that melts on your tongue and makes you the smartest person in the room? You’re back to your old self after a few hours, with a headache to boot.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s not magic.”

I uncorked the vial. Its liquid smelled like lemons and fizzed. Popping bubbles tickled my nose. This seemed somehow so friendly, so teasing, that I was reminded of Sid. I tipped the vial and drank.

The liquid burned, pleasingly, all the way down.

The pillow beneath my cheek felt as smooth as milk.

I dropped like a stone into sleep.

What is? What is happening over there?

Murder.

A scream split the air. I wrenched free of the girl and out of our hiding place.

Many people in the crowd had glowing knives now. Their hands lifted and plunged. Little fires danced off the blades. I could see now, through the roiling mob of people, a creature at the center.

It had a vaguely human shape, but hands all over its naked body. They
stretched open in pain. It was the same creature I had dreamed about when I was in the prison with Sid.

It screamed. It tried to snatch at people surrounding it, but the crowd lopped off the many hands and struck at the creature’s throat. Bright red spilled from its mouth and wounds, but it was not normal blood. It flowed like liquid flame, striped with pink, edged with orange.

The god’s blood poured onto the black-and-white pavement, and the creature’s screams faded to a whimper.

No one, said the girl by my side, has ever killed a god before.
When the fire-blood slowed to a trickle and then stopped, the crowd fled. The agora was empty now, save for the enormous mutilated carcass.

No one except the girl and I was there to see a duskwing, its cool gray feathers stammering at its sides, dip its beak in the blood.

It shifted before our eyes, wings painted with sudden scarlet. Its stubby, thin tail bloomed into long, soft, curling pink feathers. Its eyes winked like bright emerald chips.

That is the Elysium, I said.

She nodded. The gods’ bird, she said, and fell silent as it took flight, its scalloped-edged wings illuminated by the sun. It ribboned through the sky, dipping and weaving through the hot blue.

I started to ask him what exactly that meant, when he brushed loose hair out of my eyes and tucked it fondly behind my ear. “It’s easy to be good to you.” His hand trailed down my neck and brushed over my collarbone, not quite touching my breast, but almost. “But you must be careful around Raven.”

Aden took my hand and gently pulled me close. My gaze was level with his tanned neck. I saw him swallow. His breath brushed my brow as he said, “I have missed you.”

His hands slid down my back.

I knew what he wanted, though he didn’t ask for it, and it seemed like something he deserved, so I gave it to him.
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On the walk home through the Ward, I kept my hand in my pocket, my fingers on Raven's image, tracing the sharp-edged square. Though I had rinsed my face and mouth and hands, I felt coated with something sticky. Sometimes people want things so badly you feel like it's your obligation to give it. I knew that was wrong, yet I had gone to bed with Aden anyway, as if I had built my own trap. Now he would expect more from me. A sick, worried feeling settled in my stomach. I blamed Aden. I blamed myself. I wasn't sure who really was to blame.

"Not quite. I want leverage. Let's say this magic or trick can be bottled up. Its source discovered. Then I can bring it home—or bring the secret to it home. I could bargain with my parents. Marriage for a woman means the same thing where I come from as it does here: life with a man. Sleeping in his bed. I won't do it. I have tried to explain to my parents, but they don't want to listen. They never even let me finish. They have too much to gain by selling me off. So I can't ever go home ... unless maybe I can offer them something valuable enough to secure my freedom. Something to offset the cost they'll bear if I don't marry."

"Examination."

"You like danger too much," I told her.

She tipped her head slightly in acknowledgment. The lamplight caught the gold in her hair. "I know. It's a flaw."

I wondered, just for a moment, whether her short hair would feel like velvet at the nape of her neck.

I imagined it brushing my cheek.

I thought about drinking the dream of new, the way the liquid had fizzed on my tongue. Although the dream had been no more real than any other, and was filled as all dreams are with impossibilities, it had felt so vivid. I remembered the duskwing drinking the god's blood and transforming into the Elysium bird, and for the first time, as I looked at Sid's excited mouth, I felt a tickle of uncertain exploration, a wondering ... was the bird special? Was it the gods' bird?

Did the feather hidden beneath my shirt lend me some power that made Sid look at me the way she was looking at me?

Like I was captivating.
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“Start by explaining what a ladies’ maid is supposed to do,” I said. “I have no idea.”

She cocked a flirtatious brow. “You could always help take off my clothes.”

I flinched, startled by her daring. But it was just a joke, one made for the pleasure of seeing me squirm. She laughed. “I don’t need you to do anything. I asked for you to be my ladies’ maid so that we could talk in private. Though, to be honest, dresses are a pain. All those fastenings in the back.”

“I have never seen you in one before now. You don’t look like yourself.”

She glanced down at her deeply red dress. “Too much fabric. Too flowy. But it’s fine.”

She didn’t sound like it was fine. I said, “You don’t like it.”

She shrugged. “It’s what people expect. But it reminds me of my old life. It makes me look...”

I thought of Annin’s word: beautiful. “Like a prize to be won?”

She was quiet. The red silk of her dress lay open on her shoulders, exposing the skin of her back down to her waist. I had decided, resolutely, not to look at her bare skin. But a drop of water fell between her shoulder blades. For a moment I didn’t understand where the water had come from. I thought it might be an illusion.

But it was from my hair. The water droplet had slipped from the ends of my hair, wet from the bath. I saw her skin twitch. The water slid down her spine. It disappeared into the silk at her waist.

I stood. I said good night. I closed the door behind me.

I don’t think she knew my heart was twisting inside me like a blind animal.

I don’t think she knew I had held my breath as I undid each fastening.

She couldn’t have known how I went to my room and crawled into bed,
worried about how bold I had been.

What I had done could easily have looked like nothing—no more than me performing my new job as her maid, for which she had paid handsomely.

But I knew what it really was.

I liked Sid too much. I liked the sight of her bare back. I had wanted to follow the water droplet with my fingertip.

In my bed in the dark I touched the Elysium feather where it burned against my breast. I wondered if the feather had made me want Sid. I wondered if it could make her want me.

But it was a good reason, and if Sid could laugh at it, it was only because her life had been so easy. “As if you need a reason,” I said. “As if you don’t just tumble into any woman’s bed.”

“You wound me, Nirrim.” She lay a hand on her heart. “Not just any woman. I have standards. They must be beautiful. Adoring.” She ticked the criteria off with her fingers. “They must let me have my way. And never stay longer than one night.”

“How romantic.”

“What do you mean, exactly?” she asked. “Someone who is mixed, or a woman who likes women?”

It startled me, how easily she could mention something that, at least in the Ward, was scandalous. “Someone who is mixed.”
I looked up at her. Rain dripped from her eyelashes. It dripped from her full mouth. It had already soaked her thin dress, darkening its hue. I could see clearly the shape of her narrow body, the little dip of her navel, the rigid outline of the dagger and its leather belt beneath the wet silk. She pulled me to my feet. I was so unprepared for that—or maybe she had tugged harder than she intended—that I wobbled on my feet. I swayed too close to her, to her rain-wet mouth. My hand went to her shoulder. I didn’t mean to do it. It was instinct, to steady myself. For a moment, she allowed the touch, then stepped back. My hand skidded down the sodden, rumpled silk of her arm and fell away.

I had regained my balance, but inside I was still unsteady. My fingers were alive, feeling strangely as though they had brushed against something rough that pricked my skin with splinters of pleasure. I tucked my fingers into my hand. The rain helped the feeling go away.

“Yes?” She straightened, and looked directly at me. “What did you think?” I blurted, “That when you wanted something, you wouldn’t rest until you got it.”

“Only when we are talking about women, dear Nirrim.” Her words made me hot with shame, because I realized that if she wanted me, she would have had me. It must not have been on her mind.

But it was on mine.

I said, “Aren’t you going to ask me why I want to go with you?”
She caught my empty hand. “Please.” She was serious now. “Forgive me. I was angry.”

She held my hand a little too hard, but I liked it. I curled my fingers around hers. And that was all right. A woman could hold a woman’s hand. Friends did that in the Ward all the time, and no one looked at them with reproach. Sid’s skin was soft, her hand warmer than mine. Looking at my fingers entwined with hers, I asked, “Why were you angry?”

“I was angry at myself.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s all the answer you’ll get.” She opened my hand and studied the well of my palm. She ran a thumb over it. I felt the echo of her touch travel up my back. She brought my hand to her mouth. She kissed my palm, then closed my hand around the ghost of her kiss, which sang into my closed fingers. Pleasure poured down my wrist.

“We don’t have to have them right away. You already take the anys,” he said, referring to the herb Raven gave me monthly to prevent pregnancy. It was illegal in the Ward, where the prevention or termination of pregnancy resulted in prison, but I couldn’t imagine having a child, especially not when children could be snatched in the night.

“What if I never want one?” I said.
Aden said, “What will happen when she tries to make you do something you
don’t want to do?”
“I don’t know what you mean,” I said, though I knew exactly what he meant.
“I saw how she looked at you.”
My face flushed again, this time with shame for how much I wished he were
right. “You’re mistaken.”
“The High Kith have no morals. All they care about is decadence. Nothing
matters except what they want. Wait and see. She will try to use you.”
I want her to, I almost said. Then I saw, as clearly as a god’s prophecy, every-
thing that would happen after. His look of horror, maybe even hate. The disgusted
words that would fall from his mouth. I saw how he would see me, which would be
how other people would see me, too. It filled me with fear. I reached for him and
kissed him hard and deep, my hands in his hair, his chest flat against mine. “Don’t
worry,” I murmured into his mouth.
What if she guessed that what I felt for her grew stronger every day? That my
desire was for her, not Aden?
“I meant something else.” Nervousness raced through my chest. “When I
asked whether we would get in trouble.”
“Oh?” She lifted her brows in pretend surprise. “Were you worried that we
looked ... inappropriate?”
“I would have gotten in trouble, in the Ward. I might have been tithed.”
She stopped looking amused.
“It’s against the law,” I said.
“I see,” she said slowly. “Why?”
“Because it’s wrong.”
She blinked. “Is it?”
“I don’t think it is.”
“Such a relief,” she said dryly. “It’d be a little late for you to decide I’m im-
moral. Are we done talking about me? Because I want to show you something.”
“Rules?” She widened her eyes. Laughing, she said, “Are you asking for a handbook on the seduction of women? It is an art, Nirrim, not a science. Oh, you didn’t like that. Such a scowl! Are you going to stamp your foot?”

probably, unless you do decide I am a deviant monster, which some people do, but none whose company I care to keep. It is not against the law in the High quarter for a woman to be with a woman or for a man to be with a man. No one is going to prison for it. I’m not sure why it’s different in the Ward, except that the Council wants the Half Kith to make babies. To build up the workforce, I imagine. Here, beyond your wall, the High Kith are concerned with concentrating wealth within families, which means having one or—at most—two children. And the High Kith care most about pleasure, so they don’t mind others seeking it. Are there some who might look at me with dislike? Yes. Will they get in my way? They had better not. Even that lord who had me arrested for thievery probably cared less that I was a woman than that his wife had played him for a fool. Now. Are the rules clear? Need we talk about people hating me?” Her tone was airy, but her dark eyes now had a hard, lacquered look to them. “We can do that if you want, but it’s an ugly topic for a pretty day.”

I couldn’t fall asleep. I imagined Sid sleeping in this bed, which was softer than I knew beds could be. The bed felt like sleep itself, the best kind of sleep: plush and buoyant. But my body was fully awake. It was pretending to be under Sid’s body. It was pretending to be that white petal between her fingers. It was as if my mind had nothing to do with this imagining, as if it weren’t my brain conjuring images of her mouth on mine, or remembering the exact shape of her hands. It was my skin and my needy bones. It was my heart going too hard.

And then, though you would think I had learned better, after what had happened to Helin, I would return to the window. The girl in the glass would smile.

The wind whipped the edge of my coat as I walked home from Aden’s. My mouth still tasted like his mouth. Things had gone too far.

I was the one who allowed that to happen.
When I climbed up far enough to know—to know the fact deep in my body, in my trembling legs and dry throat—that if I fell I would die, I stopped. I hugged the pipe. The wind blew dust against the wall. My mind seemed to flip upside down. My sandals skidded along the pipe. Nausea rose up my throat and I had an image of vomiting out my insides, of my stomach coming out first, then my heart, my lungs. I imagined these organs blundering from my mouth and dropping one by one to the ground with soft thuds.

And that was stupid, so stupid. I couldn’t let my imagination feel too real.

I forced my eyes open. I saw the pipe. I saw my bleeding fingers, tipped with

SOMETHING SEIZED MY FOOT. I jolted, and I would have come off the pipe entirely if not for my grip on the gutter’s frets.

“Out of my way.”

I glanced down. My heart got stuck in my throat. A militiaman was just below me, hand wrapped around my ankle. He shook my leg. “Please,” I said. “Stop! I’ll fall.”

“The bird is flying away!” His face shone with sweat. “Get off, damn the gods!” He yanked at me. I slid, my hands coming off the fret.

My fingers snagged the indi flower vine wrapped around the gutter. It held my weight.

“You are blocking my way,” he said, and when I glanced down into his face it was filled with grim determination and need. He would kill me, I realized.

Hands twisted in the indi vine, I begged, “Let me go.”

He didn’t release my ankle. “The bird is mine.”

His final word echoed among the buildings, but in an otherworldly voice, higher than his own. It was the bird. Mine, it sang.
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I kicked the man’s face.
He cried out. I felt him fall from me. The pipe, still in his grip, came off the wall.
I clung to the vine, which spun like rope from one anchored point. I heard the loud clank of the pipe and the thump of his body on the pavement.
He lay twisted below, legs splayed. I gripped the vine. Blood pooled beneath him. A veil of fear prickled over me.
The noise must have been heard. Other militiamen would come.
The alleyway rang with shocked silence. Then, in the distance, I heard cries.

I felt suddenly tired and consumed by cold. I had killed that soldier. I had done something terrible that could never be undone, that only proved that no matter how hard I tried to be otherwise, I was someone who made mistakes. Who looked at statues and thought they were people. Who looked at a reflection and thought it was another girl instead of only the image of herself. Who saw no other way out of a situation than murder.

Whatever reason it had decided not to fear me, I couldn’t question the peace that spread from where it perched upon my knee, drifting down my leg and up into my stomach, stealing over my chest. I dipped my fist into the coat pocket again and offered an open handful of seed. It jumped to the heel of my hand, feathers curling over my wrist, caressing my upper arm. It ate. The beak gently jabbed the palm of my hand, a tender little needle.

What are you? I wondered as I studied it. What are you, really?
What am I, that you chose to come to me?
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It wasn’t possible to hide such a secret. Everyone in the tavern would learn, and then it would be only a matter of time before the Ward did, and before people began to wonder whether the death of a soldier on the day the bird flew into the Ward had something to do with me. It would be only a matter of time before the militia learned who had the bird. Then they would come for me, if not for the crime of murder, then for the crime of stealing a High-Kith pet. When the Council could sentence you to years in prison for dressing like a High-Kith lady, what would it do to someone from the Ward who had kept an Elysium?

The bird nosed among the seeds, looking for its favorites, which were slender black ovals.

The only way to keep it, I thought, was to kill it.

If I were to wring its neck, I could sell the feathers. I could see whether the stories about its meat were true. Its hollow bones.

A dead Elysium bird held so much value. It could be parcelled out secretly and slowly. That, perhaps, could be kept hidden when a living thing—with its song, its rustlings, its need for food and water, its excretions—could not.

The bird looked at me. Mine, it sang, and I was so startled that my hand sagged and the bird floated up, wings stuttering. But it settled back into my palm.

It would be easy to snap its fragile neck. I had just killed someone. The murder of a bird would be nothing by comparison. And there was so much to gain.

A treasure, Raven would say when I showed her the limp corpse, its feathers as bright as a bouquet. My treasure, she would call me.

Who knew what comforts we could bring into our home through the sale of the birds’ parts?

Who knew how many Half Kith we could save, with extra money to buy what we needed to make passports?

But the bird nestled into my palm, its feathers a warm cloud, its happiness thrumming into my skin. I had never felt or seen anything so beautiful, and it was only then that I realized how starved I had been for beauty. Its liquid green eyes studied me.
The Elysium closed its eyes and sighed. It grew heavy with sleep.

I could keep the bird, I thought, if I left the Ward. If I forged a passport for myself. If I went beyond the wall, beyond the city.

Fear flooded me. I couldn’t kill the bird. But I also couldn’t leave behind everything I knew.

I slipped the embroidered bread bag from my pocket.

I clamped the sleeping bird’s wings to its body, and thrust it into the sack.

When I was certain that no one was passing in the alley below, I climbed down a gutter pipe, the jerking, squawking bag swaying from my wrist by its drawstring.

Moonlight painted the street. The alley was a quiet, bright river.

I walked until I spotted a pair of soldiers. Dread pulsed inside me, but I couldn’t keep the bird and I couldn’t kill it. It must be returned. I had to hope that the militia would be so distracted by the Elysium that they wouldn’t think to link me to the soldier’s broken body—which, after all, would surely look like a mere accident, especially with the fallen gutter pipe.

“Here,” I said to the soldiers, holding out the bag. I remembered Helin holding out the apple and asking to be my friend.

One of them, staring, took the jolting bag. “Is that the Elysium?”

The other soldier seized my arm.

“But I’m turning it in.” Panic darted up my throat. “To be brought back to its owner.”

The soldier dragged my other arm behind me.

“It’s unharmed!” I said.

I was arrested anyway.
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THEY CAN TAKE ANYTHING from you.

You hear stories of surgeries, of how a slice of liver had been taken, or a kidney. Surgeries allowed doctors who worked for the Council to heal the High-Kith sick.

Sirah's missing eye.

Once I saw a woman whose eyelashes had been clipped to the lids. The lashes, I knew, would be crafted into fake ones for a lady to wear.

The pain of a lopped finger.

Sometimes it seemed that the tithe was not about physical pain or weakness or even shame, but fear. I was afraid that a judge might discover something I hadn't known I couldn't lose. Maybe I wouldn't recognize it as valuable until it was stripped from me.

“Do you think yourself special?” the judge said. “Perhaps you think yourself too good for your kith. Perhaps, indeed, too good for any kith. Would you like to become Un-Kith?”

I had never seen an Un-Kith, but I knew they existed. They cleaned the waste from the sewers. They worked in the cane fields outside the city. It was a choice offered, I had heard, to the worst offenders in the Ward: death or Un-Kith? Sirah, who had been imprisoned more than once, said that sometimes the guards would sweep through the prison and randomly pull Half Kith from cells. She never saw them again.

The chair I had been shoved into smelled of sweat. A faint trace of urine permeated the leather seat. “No,” I said. “I know what I am. I don’t deserve anything. Please. I accept the sentence.” I tried to twist my wrists in the straps that bound my hands to the arms of the chair, but they had been tightened hard, so that the bones hurt.

“The owner will be grateful for the return of this pet,” the judge said, “but the law is what it is, and your impertinence is not appreciated.”

I tried again to give him what he wanted. “I am grateful for the sentence,” I said. “I thank you for your mercy.”
I could bear a month’s sentence. The tithe was but a vial of blood a day. An easy tithe, a common one.

I said, “I know nothing.”

“Did you know a militiaman died near the time of your arrest?”

Fear trickled down my throat. “No.”

“You were not so far from where the body lay. Perhaps you saw something?”

“No.”

“Really?” he said.

“I can’t say what I don’t know.”

He rang a bell. The soldiers unstrapped me. Blood rushed back into my hands, making them sing with pain.

“Then this matter is concluded,” the judge said.

“I borrowed it. I must return it.” What would Raven say? I remembered the sting of her metal brush striking my cheek. But it had been so long since she had needed to correct me, and I worked so hard for her and our cause, that it wasn’t her punishment I dreaded. It was her disappointment. “I already paid my tithe.”

Gauze wrapped my inner arm just below my elbow, where a needle had slid in and drained the first vial of blood.

“You can pay in other ways,” said the soldier in the cell with me, his hand tight on my shoulder. He was older than me, the age of a man with children. He was thick with muscle, his beard neatly trimmed and shining in the light cast by the lantern in the hallway. I could smell the oil of his beard. I imagined him stroking it in the morning, trimming it just so, making his appearance neat.

It would rasp against my face. Maybe later, when he was done, my cheek would bear a rash.

But the skin would heal, I thought. And the kind of tithe he was imagining was no more than what any woman in the Ward might have to pay.
“No,” he said. “I was accused of theft.”
His tone made me doubt he was completely innocent. “What did you really do?”

“Are you easily shocked?”
“I don’t know.”
He was amused. “Will you tell me if I shock you?”

“Why would you care,” I said, “if you shock a Half Kith?”

“It’s important to me to know.”

“Did you murder someone?”

“No! What kind of person do you think I am?”
I was quiet at that.

He said, “I took a lord’s lady to bed.”

“Oh.”

“The husband came home. He got quite an eyeful. He wanted to punish me, and I can hardly blame him. It was quite obvious that she liked what I was doing far better than whatever he typically did for her. Now, he didn’t want what I had done to be widely known. It would shame him, you see. How to solve his dilemma? Accuse me of theft, clap me in the local prison, and there I am punished and gotten well rid of.”

He thought about it. “I wanted to see what she would do.”

“And she said nothing.”

“Nothing at all.”

“Did that hurt you?”

“No,” he said, but I didn’t quite believe him.

“Did you love her?”

“I am not interested in love. I did what I did with her because I wanted her and she wanted me.” He seemed to mull it over. “I suppose I am disappointed. She could have told the truth. She didn’t. I thought her more courageous than that. Oh, well.”

“Oh, well?”

“So I have shocked you.”
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I hadn’t realized that only Half Kith had to pay for a crime. The ball in my belly hardened to stone.

He said, “I saw them take your blood.”

“Of course.”

“Of course,” he repeated, drawing out the words, a question in his tone. “That’s what you mean by a tithe.”

comforted me to think that he had nothing more than I did here. He, too, would have to relieve himself in a waste bucket and live with the stink.

Quietly, he said, “I am interested in honor. I just wish I weren’t.”

I did not care.

“Yes, the lady cared about her reputation. Yes, I stayed silent so that no one else would know about her and me. She led me to her bedroom, Nirrim. And then we were caught, and she was ashamed. Silent. I didn’t love her. But yes, it hurt me.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I like it here. The city is beautiful. Glittery. As if a god skimmed a great hand over the bright sea to collect its colored reflections of the sun, then tossed it over Ethin. And the parties! So decadent. I especially love this silver-pink wine that makes you tell your true desires. I don’t know what I like better: watching people drink it or drinking it myself.”

I had never heard of such a wine. Was he making this up? Not wanting to reveal my ignorance about life beyond the wall, I said, “You don’t seem like someone who has a problem saying what’s on your mind.”

“So why would you let yourself drink this wine at parties? Aren’t you worried people will hear your truths?”

“Oh, I drink that wine only when I am alone.”

“So you just get drunk and talk to yourself?”

“I am excellent company.”
“If it’s so nice here,” I said, “why do you want to leave?”
“To sail the next ship. See the next land.”
“Bed the next lady?”

It was a soldier, a blood vial in his hand, its thin tubing wrapped around his wrist. He came to my cell. “Arm,” he ordered. When I approached the bars, I could not see Sid beyond the soldier’s body, and was grateful that this must mean Sid did not have the satisfaction of seeing me. I slipped the arm that hadn’t been pricked yesterday through the bars. The soldier was not fastidious in finding a vein. He jabbed away, muttering to himself as I flinched, until the needle slid in properly. I couldn’t see the blood flow through the tubing, not in that dim light, but I felt it leave me.

I didn’t want to think about clinging to the flowering indi vine while the soldier fell. I buttoned the coat. A fine perfume lingered in its fabric. “Well, you smell like a woman.”

“Hardly surprising.”
I tried to imagine the woman he had been caught with. Frail features. Long auburn hair. Exquisitely pretty. Yes, he would enjoy someone like that. I thumbed the coat’s last button into its hole.

This is sometimes how I see Helin in my mind, I told Sid. Her left palm lifted to the level of her face, head bowed, thin shoulders twitching at the fall of the slender baton in the mistress’s hand.

It was because I let you do my work, she later said to me, wrapped hand cradled to her chest. The mistress saw me let you.

the wafer-thin saucer on one palm, her gray eyes smiling at me over the glass cup’s brim. “Watch out, dear.”

“Why?” I felt heat rise to my cheeks. “What else is said about her?”

“That she is as bad as a boy.”
“How surprising,” I said, “that, for you, being late to a party actually means showing up on time to get a head start on luring a girl into bed.”

Sid was still frowning. “I am not going to sleep with Lillin.”

“She clearly thought otherwise.”

“Well, I did bed her once. But it was so long ago.”

I made a sound of helpless disgust.

“Me,” I said, uncertain.

“You are the only one I want to be with.”

“Tonight.” I didn’t know what was worse: that she had seen my jealousy, that she was trying to soothe it, or that I knew—just as Lillin or any woman Sid had ever been with should have known—that nothing Sid said or did would last.

“Any night.” She offered her arm like a man would. “Will you come inside with me?”

I took her arm. The fabric of her jacket brushed my skin. I wanted to turn in to her, to press my face against her neck. I said, “We’ll look like a couple.”

“Do you want that?”

Truth can demand so much bravery. I did not feel brave. I would not have been brave, if her question hadn’t sounded a little hopeful. Yes, I wanted everyone to think she belonged with me, that I belonged with her. Yes, even if it was only for one night. My voice was small. “I do.”

Her mouth twitched with surprise, then curled with inquisitive pleasure that I loved to see. Maybe this was a game to her, but it felt so good to be her game. “Nirrim,” she said, “I am really sorry that I am not late. May I tell you all the things I will do to make you forgive me?”

I smiled as we went inside.
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mist. Two men stood close together in a corner of the ballroom. One stroked a finger across the other’s mouth.

So easy.

No one was looking at them. No one cared. The only one staring was me.

“Your hair,” she said distractedly, “curls when wet.” She brushed away a lock of hair that was plastered to my face.

For one mad moment I leaned into her hand, which was warm and steady.

“Tired?” she asked, stroking her thumb across my cheekbone.

I shivered. “No.”

Her eyes searched mine. “Lonely?”

I was lonely for her even though she was right in front of me. I worried that if I said no she would stop touching me, and that if I said yes she would pity me. “I’m cold,” I said, which was true, but the sort of truth that acted as a lie.
Sid’s attention swiftly returned. “Are you ... taking your clothes off? I hadn’t thought we had reached that stage of our relationship.”

“It’s the whole point of the dress,” I said, glad that she was teasing me again. “It is many dresses.”

“But I like this one. You look like you’re wrapped in starlight.”

“It’s wet.” I shrugged out of the silver dress, revealing another one in pleated crimson faille.

“Ohh,” Sid said, “I want to see the rest.”

“You always want to rush everything.”

I was so tired. My feet were sore. I leaned into Sid as we walked, my head on her shoulder, half asleep. I felt, through my sleepiness, that she was wide awake. Whatever she was thinking seemed to whir inside her. I let myself feel safe, not caring if I’d discover, later, that the feeling had been a mistake. The skin of her throat felt too soft against my cheek, and her arm around me felt too good. She wouldn’t hold me like this if she didn’t feel at least part of what I felt. She wouldn’t have smiled when she realized that her watch had always worked, that my desire had been for her. She wouldn’t have loved my green dress, or touched my cheek, or kissed my palm and pretended it was an apology, or have grown suddenly distant and cold when I said I loved Aden. She wouldn’t have made me a promise. My memories were clear, and what I hadn’t understood before now seemed obvious.

I knew she would leave me. She had always said she would.
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Sid’s back was to the bedroom door. I curled my fingers into her undone white collar, hooking down, the heel of my hand against the rise of her breast beneath the stiff jacket, her skin hot to the touch, her pulse fast against my palm.

“You’re half asleep,” she said.

“I’m awake.”

Her hand lifted to cover mine and press it against her chest.

“I owe you a yes,” I said.

Her dark eyes were shadowed. My palm was flattened now, the tips of my fingers against her throat, her hand firm on mine.

I said, “Ask me to kiss you.”

She kissed me. Her mouth was hungry on mine, on my neck. Her hand fist in my hair. I pushed off her jacket, found the jut of her ribs beneath her shirt, the sweep of her belly, the leather strap of her dagger belt. I tasted her mouth. My heart was thrumming in my throat, and I was greedy for her. I loved her gasp, her teeth on my lower lip, her thigh hard between mine. I tugged her by her belt toward me. I wanted the bed; I wanted her to press me down into it.


I felt flushed all over. “You like it fast.”

“Not like this.” She pulled away. Her hair was wild, mouth swollen. She looked down at me, at her disheveled shirt. She rubbed a hand over her eyes.

“Sid.” My voice was full of yearning.

She straightened her shirt and tucked it into her trousers. “You have a life here. One that you want to keep. One that doesn’t involve me.”

“It already involves you.”

I turned my face into the pillow. The pillow didn’t smell like Sid anymore. It smelled like me, and I was glad, because it was painful enough to want her, painful enough to remember exactly the shape of her mouth beneath my tongue, without having the specific scent of her perfume and skin pressing against my face.
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But I didn’t want to talk about last night. I didn’t want to talk about how the only way I’d been able to sleep was to keep my hands beneath my pillow, so that I wouldn’t be tempted to touch myself, which would only remind me of how I wanted her hands, not mine.

explanation. Things were clear. She would regret taking me to bed. She was trying to explain that anything between us would bring me pain, because she was not someone who stayed. That she cared about me, which I could see, plain on her

“There man,” I said to Sid. “He tasted my blood in the night market. He acted so strangely afterward.”

“He did what to you?”

I drank the glass to its bottom.

“Nirrim, wait.”

But I was already floating up toward the ceiling and its swirling dancers.

“You do know the right people to have a good time,” he said conspiratorially to me. “The foreign lord-lady from the country no one knows! She can stay awake for days. Eat pleasure dust until dawn. Always sweet-talking her way into the sheets. Her list of conquests! As long as my arm!”

“He’s exaggerating,” Sid said to me.

“He’s exaggerating,” Sid said to me.

“Did you see her fight with Lord Tibrin? She pulled a knife on him.”

“Dagger,” Sid corrected.

“She killed him dead.”

“A mere scratch,” said Sid. “He’s fine.”
“Well, I suppose there are seeds of truth to any rumor.” She saw my face and said, “I’m joking! Mostly. I like pleasing women. What is so wrong with that?”

I turned back to the man, who was excitedly wrapping a blue braid around one finger. “You met me in the night market in the Middling quarter,” I said. “I was dressed as a Middling. For fun. For a break from being so bored and so High.”

He nodded understandingly.

I said, “You tasted my blood.”

“Oh.” He released the braid. It unspun from his fingers. “That was not fun. Not fun at all. Why did you do that to me?” Tears welled in his eyes.

“You did it to me. You insisted. You said you would help me if I gave you three drops of blood.”

A sick feeling had been growing inside me. I turned over his earlier words in my mind. “You said that Middling blood doesn’t work, and neither does High-Kith blood. You’re taking it from the tithes, aren’t you? From Half-Kith prisoners. What does Half-Kith blood do? How does it work?”

“Maybe three drops was too much,” he said.

A realization seized me. I looked at Sid. “The elixir isn’t pink tea. It’s watered-down blood.”
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She groaned. “Please just get this over with.”

I nicked my finger on the dagger’s edge. Blood instantly welled. She opened her eyes. “Gods,” she said.

“Just one.” I held out my hand.

She lifted herself onto her elbows, her head tipped back, her short hair bright in the rising sun. She gripped my wrist and lifted her face to my hand, licking my finger like a calf. I shivered. The cut stung, but I loved the feel of her tongue on me. I couldn’t look away from her dark eyes, her mouth on my hand. Then her eyes

I followed her, shoving the door open. “You have no right to be angry. Nothing was done to you. The Council took my blood. They have been stealing from the Ward. Hair for wigs, limbs for High-Kith surgeries, blood for magic. They have been taking children, and I don’t even know why. I get to be angry. Not you.”

“Fine,” she said. “I don’t get to be angry.” But she looked furious. “Now let me be. Go away. I am not tasting your blood.”
“It’s hard to remember something you no longer have,” Sid said. “My mother caught me with a girl when I was seventeen. She cried.”

“What? Is it against your country’s law to be with a woman?”

“No.”

“But she doesn’t like it.”

“It’s not that, exactly...” Sid paused, considering, and when she spoke I saw that it was only because she had been thinking about this for years that she was able to speak clearly. “She has friends like me. I don’t think she would care about me liking women if it didn’t interfere with her plans. She cried because she was going to force her plans on me anyway, and she was sad for what it would do to me, and guilty for herself.”

“What about your father?”

“I think he hopes the problem will solve itself.” She got quiet. “I don’t want to be a problem.”

I stroked her hair. “You’re not.”

“I don’t want to marry.”

“You won’t.”

“He’s as bad as she is. Just more passive.”

“I don’t understand why it’s so important to them that you marry.”

She shrugged. “It’s expected. They want grandchildren. They want me to marry their friends’ son. That family will be angry if I say no.”

“They would rather lose you than lose their friends?”

“Let’s just say they hope to get everything they want.”

“But they risk losing everything.”

“I guess they must be comfortable with that possibility.”
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Sid sat up. She ran a hand through her hair, trying to get it to settle. She stood, walked to the window, and opened it. The salty harbor air drifted in. The rising sun burned through the dawn. The sky was a thin blue, with a sheen like hammered metal. “She grew up,” Sid said. “Last I heard, she was engaged to a man.”

“Does that bother you?”

She shrugged. “It’s not like it was true love written in the stars.”

“She probably wishes she still had you.”

“Well”—she smiled, but her heart wasn’t in it—“who wouldn’t?”

“I would.”

Slowly, she said, “Is that what you want?”

“What do you mean?”

“To think about me while you’re in that young man’s bed.”

I stared.

“People want all sorts of things,” she said. “It’s not the strangest desire to want to be with one person but imagine another.”

I left the bed and came to her. “I don’t want to be with him.”

“No?”

“No. I don’t love him. I just said I did. He expected it, and I worried what he
She leaned one shoulder against the wall, looking down at me, her brow furrowed, her hands stuffed in her pockets.

I said, “I want you.”

Her expression changed. It deepened with decision. Her mouth slipped into a slight smile that looked almost self-mocking. “Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Nirrim, I can’t be good to you.”

“Then be bad.”

Her hands still in her pockets, she leaned to brush her face against my neck. She kissed my throat. The heat of her mouth was everywhere except on my mouth, her body nudging me up against the wall. Her tongue found my quick pulse. “Touch me,” I whispered.

“Not yet.”

Her mouth seared through my thin silk dress, her tongue dampening it. I felt her gentle teeth.

“Kiss me,” I said.

“Not yet.”

I touched her cheek. She turned to glide her mouth over my fingers. “Please,” I said, and pulled her toward me, my mouth hungry for hers. I kissed her. Her lips opened beneath mine. She made a low sound in her throat, and then her hands were on me, finding the shape of my body, its delicate spots, its needy ones. She unbuttoned the top crystal button of my dress, and moved slowly to the next one. Impatient, I began to undo them myself. She stopped my hands. “Let me,” she said. Her tongue lightly touched my lower lip, and I knew I would let her do
anything.

She undid all the buttons, her fingers dipping lightly beneath the silk to touch my skin, until the dress fell from my shoulders and slid to the floor.

“I’m not sure,” I said, and her hands stilled. She pulled slightly away, her eyes hesitant, and I saw that she misunderstood. I said, “I’m not sure how.”

She smiled. “I am.”

She knelt before me, her lips and tongue on my belly. “Please don’t stop,” I said.

Her mouth went lower.

My hands twisted in her hair.

She reached up and pulled me down to her, her mouth nuzzling my throat. “Then go,” she murmured against my skin, “and return soon. I will miss you.”

“It’s only for a few hours.”

“I will miss you the moment you leave.”

She loved exaggeration, loved to flatter. It was her way. Still, my breath caught as though what she had said was real. “Will you?”

“I will be so lonely for you.”

I played along, because it felt so good to believe she meant what she said.

“And what shall I do to console you upon my return?”

“You know.”

“Do I?”

Her hand slid up my thigh, and in fact I did not leave her bed, not right away, not for some time.
“You said it.” I remembered my earlier thought about how it wasn’t wrong to want, how it was necessary. But of course nothing is as simple as that. Wanting something doesn’t always mean it is owed to you. “I know you love me, but that doesn’t mean I have to give myself to you.”

“Let me guess. You’ve given yourself to her.”

“Yes,” I said.

“That’s disgusting.”

“I disagree.”

“It’s against the law.”

“Then I’ll continue to break it.”

“You have been seduced,” he said. “You don’t mean what you say. She has twisted your thoughts. She has tricked you with gold and glamour. She has promised to take you away from here.”

This time, his bars shot home. Sid had never made me any promises.

“I will tell,” he said. “I will denounce you as a murderer. A deviant.”

“Do it, and the moment I am in prison the Ward will turn against you.”

“Because you are so special?” he sneered. “You are a fool. You think she loves you. All she wants is to get you between her legs. She will use you and cast you aside.”

His words were corrosive because they were exactly what I feared. I saw, from the acute gladness in Aden’s face, that he knew his words burned through me.

He pressed his advantage. “Can’t you see that I have only ever wanted what is best for you?” His voice dropped low. “You might think you love her, but that’s only because you don’t know what love is.”

I was afraid to think about whether I loved Sid. Aden was right about one thing: if I loved her, I would suffer for it.
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I dashed it from her hand.
“Nirrim!”
“That’s blood. You are drinking someone’s blood!”
“You are completely hysterical. Calm yourself right now, or you will answer to my hand. Blood! Nonsense. It is simply a drink that will make you prettier. I am being nice to you, and this is the thanks I get.”
“I am telling you the truth.”

for years, and although the pendant had been hidden beneath Raven’s dress, it had nonetheless reminded me of my mother’s necklace, and even then I didn’t guess. I told Sid that I was a murderer, a criminal, a fool, a fool, a fool.
“You are not a fool.” She kissed my tear-wet mouth.
I tightened my fingers in her shirt. “You warned me that you are a liar.”
“I am not good with the truth. But I am not lying to you now.”

What if, should the councilmen catch me, they took my whole body, and made my blood into tea, and found uses for every part and the magic it would give them?
when I promised her a rare elixir. “I haven’t seen it used at any party.” I offered the
dressmaker the little stoppered vial I had won at Pantheon. This time, it was filled
with my own watered-down blood. I’d had to guess at the ratio of blood to water. “I
don’t know how strong it is.”

“What will it do?”

“It will make you remember something you have forgotten.”

She lifted her little chin. “I’m not sure I fully believe you.” She offered a cruel
dare: “If you can really do as you say, make me remember my last time with
Sidarine.”

I touched her hand, and thought of how it must have touched Sid. As painful
as this was, part of me also wanted it: to share Sid with someone, to know that I
was not the only one who had wanted her.

Lillin’s eyes slipped closed. Her hand twitched in mine. A breath escaped her
lips. I hated this. I needed it. It felt like we were both trying to hold a ghost.
and not when the moon sinned as other gods sinned—the moon knew that the
god of foresight’s words rang with truth.

Once tempted to taste a mortal kiss, many gods could not resist. Soon the bellies of mortals and gods alike swelled with hybrid fruit. Half-godlings slipped into the world.

They had gifts of their own—weaker but unpredictable, spectacular, subtle. The gods fought among themselves to protect the half-gods, or make them pawns in games against their god-kin. Most consternating, however, was that the little half-gods looked no different from humans. Sometimes divinity did not shine from them as with the gods’ first half-child, but rather sank deep, undetected, like underground water.

Nor did all half-gods bear allegiance to the gods, or even fellowship toward humans. Mortals who suffered the devious machinations of half-gods begged for protection from them. Some half-gods, resentful of being chits in immortal games, bucked the authority of their undying parents. They stole secrets. They played games of their own. They thwarted the will of the gods and wrought unhappiness.

They will kill one of us, said the god of foresight.

Impossible, said the pantheon. But the god of death, their monarch, craved the god of discovery’s aid.

Identify them, Death commanded.

Discovery ferreted out all the half-godlings and marked them with a sign on their brows that mortals and gods alike could see. For a time, there was calm, and the power of surprise was no longer a half-god’s domain. For a time, all was well.

But a god took pity upon the half-ones. A god who had enjoyed the chaos they caused, who had chuckled with the god of games and wrought his own mischief in
Warm with my power, proud of using it, I said, “I didn’t steal.”

“Shall we put you in a barrel studded with nails and have you dragged by horses through the streets?”

I paused, staring. Expression mild, he waited for an answer.

“I am a councilman,” I told him quickly, my voice high. “I have been your favored assistant for years. You were glad to see me when you entered the library.”

“Or put your hands in the fire until the skin crackles and the flesh cooks off the bone? A punishment most worthy for a thief.”


“It is too bad your foreigner is gone. I could take her from you. I could squeeze her body down to a pin. I would carry the pin with me always, and drive it through the tongues of liars.”

I scraped my chair back, leaping to my feet. The bird shrieked. “I left already.” The words spilled out of my mouth in a tangled stutter. “The library was empty when you arrived.”

“Sit,” he said, “or I will show no mercy in how I chastise you.”

I sat. Fear crawled over my skin.

“A sneak may be a sneak,” he said. “A liar a liar, a thief a thief, and yet still show courtesy.”

“I—” I faltered, unsure what he wanted.

“Your name.”

“Nirrim.”

He waited.

“Nirrim,” I said, “my lord.”
“THE GODS DON’T EXIST,” I said, my mouth numb.

“I don’t? And what do you think you are, half-one? I felt what you were trying to do to me. Tell me, Nirrim: What do you think I can do to you?”

I stood, ready to run from the room. He smiled, and the strength left my body. I slumped to the floor, banging my face against the chair as I went down. It clattered on top of me as I lay, and he stood to look down upon me, the hem of his red robe brushing the skin of my arm. I willed myself to move. I couldn’t even twitch my fingers.

“I am being a good god,” he said. “I haven’t stolen your sight, for example.”

Though my eyes were open, they went suddenly blind. I cried out. The bird answered my call. I heard its wings rustle.

Nothing was as dark as this. Not night, not the orphanage baby box, not even when I closed my eyes and light shone through my eyelids. The world looked entirely black and empty.

The fabric of his robe skimmed over me. I heard him walk around my prone body, pausing by my head. He could do anything to me. He could crush my face beneath his heel. He could do worse.

“Or I could steal your breath.”

And it was suddenly gone. I strained for air. My heart panicked. I felt myself choking, dying, paralyzed and alone in the airless black.

“That’s the fragile human in you,” he said, and air came rushing back into my lungs. I sucked it in, my breath a horrible keening rasp.

“God of thieves,” I said.
“Yes, little one.”
“Let me up,” I begged.
“No.”
“Give me back my sight.”
“No.”
“Please, let me go. I’ll do anything.”
“Anything?” His voice was ripe with amusement. “Such a dangerous word. I haven’t even yet caused you pain. I can slowly steal the blood from your body. The warmth from your skin. The tongue from your mouth. All the water within you, so that you desiccate into a tortured husk.”
“There must be something I can do,” I sobbed. “Something I can give you.”
“There is,” he said. “It happens to be the one thing that even I cannot steal.”
“What? Tell me.”
“You will lie there, and you will listen, and when I am done I will make you a bargain, my child.”
One should never bargain with a god. But I did not know that then.
“Should you accept,” he said, “you will leave here just as you were when I met you, save for one thing. Am I not merciful?”
“And if I say no? Will you murder me?”
His silence was thoughtful. “To whom do you belong?”
To Sid, I thought. Then I buried the thought, terrified that he might steal it from me.
“Perhaps you don’t know,” he mused. “Who bore you?”
I blinked against the blindness. I wished I could see his face. I had no idea what his expression was as he stared down at me. “I have no parents.”

The face of the god looked pleased, even proud. “Well done,” he said.
Then he leaned toward me, placed his mouth on mine, and sucked all the breath from me.
BOOK REVIEW: THE MIDNIGHT LIE By Mary Rutkoski

PROFANITY COUNT (and other sensitive words)
Other words
Blood, bloodied 160

RED FLAGS
Sexual Content
Violence
Drugs, Drinking Blood
Gruesome
Bizarre

CONCLUSION
Not appropriate literary content for K-12 schools